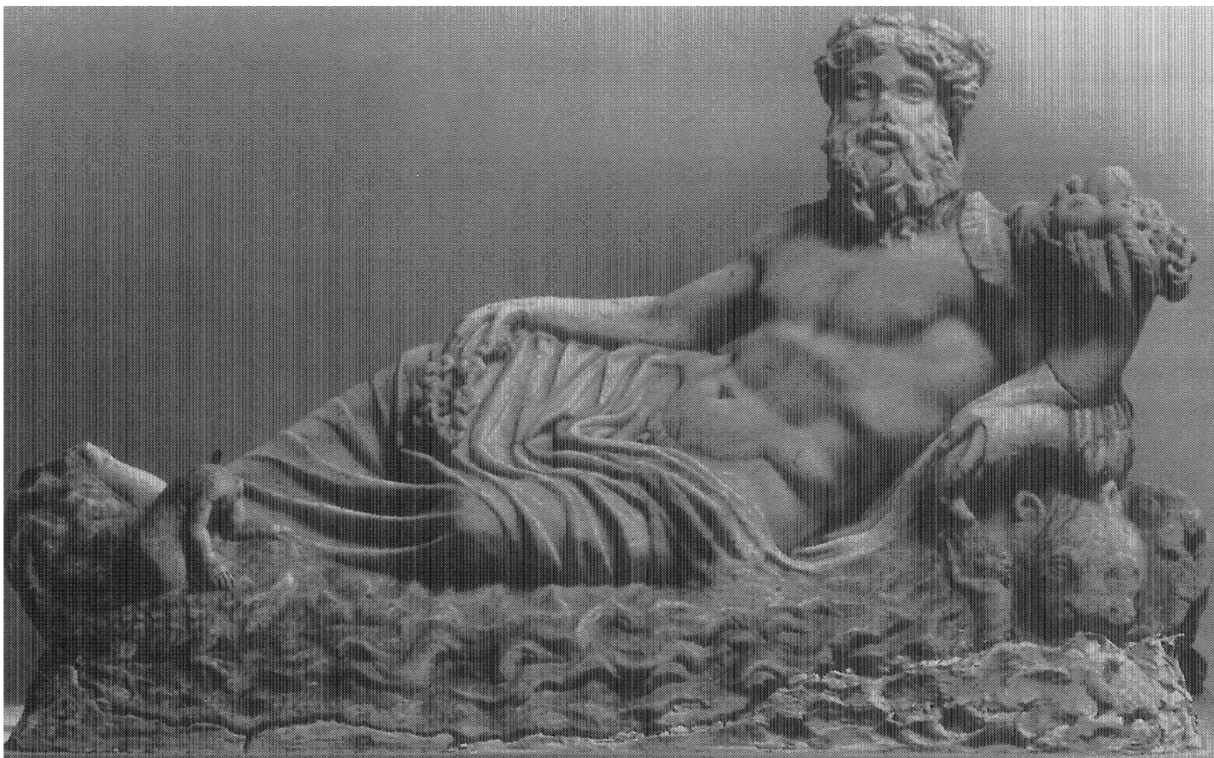
# Imperial waters

## Roman river god art in context



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## Introduction

From Coptic churches to baroque palaces and from monumental fountains to private gardens, the personifications of rivers have had a rich afterlife throughout the Western world and beyond. Any culturally inclined tourist will, on his travels through Europe, have been confronted with the image of the reclining bearded male with overflowing urns and cornucopia in hand. In Western European art-history they function as geographical markers, easy yet impressive references to rivers and regions such as the Rhone in France (see figure 1). Such images find their source in the ancient world, which has left us with a considerable corpus of river god artworks. Because artworks ancient and (early-)modern are almost identical in their iconography and execution, the meaning of such images for a Roman audience is often taken for granted. Roman river gods are identified as personifications of rivers and little more, short-hands to refer to a region within the empire.

What intrigued me about these artworks was their anthropomorphism. Personification is such a commonplace occurrence within European art history that it obscures the mechanics and psychology at work behind such artworks in a radically different world like imperial Rome. What does it mean when a river is represented as a human being with individual characteristics, instead of a non-sentient line on a map or in a landscape painting? Does it reveal something about the Roman conceptualization of space and landscape? In my search for answers I could find only a very small number of monographs dedicated to the subject of Roman river gods.[1] Le Gall's *Recherches sur le culte du Tibre* delved deeply into the Roman cult of the Tiber, but was far too strong in its conclusions as well as showing its age. Ostrowski's *The personifications of rivers in Greek and Roman art* aimed to straddle the divide between an art historical catalogue and a work of historical interpretation without quite achieving either end. Lastly, Klementa's excellent *Gelagerte Flußgötter* is the most thorough but also the most art historical of the three, being almost exclusively concerned with the dating and appreciation of artistic works.

All three works however pointed me towards an interesting trend which had rarely been noted before: Roman river god artworks were relatively meagre before the Flavian period, yet suddenly rose in number under the Flavian emperors, flourished during the second century, only to greatly decline again at the beginning of the third century A.D. This marked rise and fall set me on the path towards this thesis. The main question guiding this investigation is a simple one: what cultural meaning did these river god artworks have to the Greco-Roman culture of the High Empire and, secondly, can the rise, flourishing and fall of such artworks be explained?

Setting out for an answer I will firstly present a historical overview of the artworks themselves, begin in the Hellenistic period when the reclining river god was first developed and ending in the third century, when the river god artworks slowly disappeared from the iconographical record. For this chapter I rely heavily on Klementa's work, but have cross-referenced with other sources such as the *LIMC*. For this chapter, I have focussed on the major rivers of the Roman Empire: the Tiber, Nile, Danube, Rhine, Euphrates and Tigris. Not only do the above rivers appear with some frequency in imperial art, they are also necessary to limit the range and scope of my research into more

[1] Though luckily, awareness seems to be growing: there have appeared a number of articles in recent years delving a little deeper into Roman river deities. See Braun (1996), Huskinson (2005) and Meyers (2009).

manageable proportions. To further streamline the investigation I have mostly focussed on sculpture and coinage from the late 1st and the second century A.D., the artistic formats where river deities appear with the greatest frequency. Smaller, local rivers as well as art forms like mosaics will however receive due attention.

To explain the trend signalled in the first chapter, I turn to three seemingly disparate subjects. In the second chapter I will explore the religious potential of river god artworks. Though they depict deities, or at the very least divinized personifications, this does not mean they can be automatically linked to cultic worship of rivers. As we shall see, cultic worship of rivers is relatively scarce during the Roman Empire. The religious importance of rivers finds expression in other ways, such as their role as communicator between the world of gods and that of men.

Taking into account their ambivalent religious importance, I will turn to geography in the third chapter. Rivers are of course everyday elements of the European landscape: lines to be mapped and obstacles to be crossed. I turn to Pliny the Elder, writing during the Flavian dynasty, to explore the role of rivers in Roman geographical ideas. Pliny, though seemingly far removed from the sacred floods of the second chapter, actually betrays a number of remarkable similarities in the way he treats rivers within the narrative of the *Natural History*.

Fourthly I turn to the relationship between Roman imperial power and the control over nature. Using Statius as a guide, I will explore Roman ideas about imperial power and the ability to control water resources through the medium of bridges, canals and aqueducts. These turn out to have their origin in the Roman triumph and its depiction of chained river deities.

Throughout these three chapters, river gods artworks will play a considerable role, but will mostly stay in the background. In the last chapter I will once again turn explicitly to the artworks of the first chapter, combining the insights gained from chapters two to four. In this last chapter, which combines interpretation with conclusion, I explore the unique importance river god imagery held to the citizens of the Roman Empire.

## Chapter 1 – Depicting river gods

River deities[2] have an incredibly long history stretching back to archaic Greece and yet this particular type of representation was developed only much later. Its exact origins are shrouded in mystery. Classical Greek river deities, like the popular Acheloös, who was worshipped throughout the Greek world, are almost without exception depicted with bull-like attributes, ranging from humanoid figures with horns to almost fully zoomorphic creatures. These classical river gods are usually in active, upright positions. How and when the reclining-type was developed and spread across the Mediterranean is a matter of debate: Ostrowski locates the development and canonization of the reclining river deity to the major temple projects of the 5th century B.C., where sculptors chose to depict their river gods in reclining poses for compositional reasons.[3] Gais sees the type as a late Hellenistic invention and traces the origins of the type back to banqueting scenes and especially the reclining statues of Herakles, who was often depicted together with Acheloös and had strong connections with both water and fertility in Hellenistic times.[4] Alexandria is usually conjectured to be the city where the type was definitively established and brought into the Hellenistic repertoire, as well as being home to (one of the) original artwork(s) depicting the Nile deity, which was in turn deported to Rome by Vespasian.[5]

### 1.1 – *Source: river gods in Hellenistic and early imperial art*

The earliest artistic depiction of a reclining river god still extant is a small statuette of white marble representing the Nile, discovered in Hermoupolis Magna, modern-day Ashmunein (figure 2). It shows artistic similarities in the treatment of the body and face to a number of sculptures from Hieron on Samothrace, which can be dated to approximately 150-100 B.C.[6] What is interesting for us here, is that this small Nile already shows a full set of attributes. It is the earliest known, full-fledged example of what was to become a type of image found all over the Roman Empire and in about every artistic format. The Ashmunein Nile deity is depicted in a reclining position, as a corpulent and muscular man with thick hair and a large beard. The head is tilted sideways and is crowned by a garland of flowers. The god's left arm, bearing a cornucopia, rests on a hippopotamus. In his right arm he holds a bushel of grain. His right leg is raised; both his legs are covered by a mantle. His genitals however remain uncovered. Others rivers are never portrayed as corpulently as the Nile, nor do they have the exact

[2] To emphasize the, in my opinion, deeper meaning of these images, I have chosen to consistently use the term 'river god' or 'river deity' instead of 'river personification' which is used in, for example, Ostrowski (1991). Though I will argue at length later on that these images do indeed have religious value, in a purely practical sense the two terms are interchangeable.

[3] Ostrowski (1991) 20-25.

[4] See Gais (1978). Though the idea is suggestive, and fits in with general Greco-Roman ideas on rivers, Gais has only circumstantial evidence to rely on.

[5] Gais (1978) 360-361, 369-370; Ostrowski (1991) 42-43. The Vatican Nile, treated at length later on in this chapter, is occasionally mentioned as a copy of this Alexandrian Nile, sometimes even as the original. Pliny however specifically mentions that the Alexandrian statue was made of greywacke, while the Vatican Nile is hewn from white marble. Furthermore, stylistically it is more akin to the artworks of the Roman empire than to those of the Hellenistic era. Ostrowski is of the opinion that the Vatican Nile is a Flavian original, though inspired by Alexandrian artworks.

[6] Klementa (1993) 10-12.

same attributes. By and large however, this type of image would remain unchanged for over five centuries.

It is improbable that the Ashmunein Nile is truly the first of its kind. It was most likely copied from or inspired by a larger, more prominent work. But if there ever was a "prototype" Nile which started the entire river god tradition, we do not know of it from either literary sources or archaeological finds. In fact, we know of few other depictions of the Nile from Ptolemaic Egypt. One, which might be quite a bit older than the statuette from Hermoupolis Magna, is a coin minted under Ptolemaeus V in 186-185 B.C. which depicts a bearded, garlanded head. According to Poole, the coin also bears an "N", as well as two lotus buds in the figure's garland. [7] It is indeed possible this is the oldest depiction of the Nile, but the coin is worn and the details Poole cites are difficult to ascertain. The other possible depiction of the Nile deity comes from the well-known Farnese Cup.[8] Here the god is again depicted in a reclining manner, accompanied by Euthenia[9], or Fortune, and a number of unknown persons, presumably of a royal family. Whether this royal family is Ptolemaic or Julio-Claudian is still a matter of debate, but the current consensus is that the cup was crafted around 100 B.C., which would place it close to the statuette described above.[10] The rarity of Nile images is even more striking when considering not only the increased artistic output of the Hellenistic period, but also the economic importance the river had for Ptolemaic Egypt.

The Tiber, who under the emperors would prove a particularly popular river deity to depict, doesn't fare much better in the Hellenistic era. Roman artistic depictions of the Tiber and other river deities only start to emerge at the end of the Republican era and even then they are scanty. The first known depiction of the Tiber dates to about 50 B.C., on a wall of a columbarium found on the Esquiline.[11] The god is depicted according to the Hellenistic model: reclining, bearded and draped in a mantle, with a crown of reeds on his head and an oar in his left hand. The deity is placed within a rural landscape and in connection to the Romulus and Remus myth, with outstretched arm reaching towards the twins in the basket nearby.[12]

[7] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 56.

[8] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 37.

[9] Euthenia, though occasionally accompanying the Nile on Alexandrian coinage and Egyptian terracotta lamps during the Empire, has been consciously left out of my research on the grounds of her complex, individual iconography which would only draw attention away from our river god artworks. Her imagery of fertility and prosperity however find due reflection in the Nile's own attributes and as a deity she only strengthened the characteristics already present in the Nile deity itself.

[10] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 37, Klementa (1993) 39.

[11] LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.1: no. 1.

[12] This might not be the only depiction of the god from the columbarium. Another depiction on the same fries shows a reclining figure with only a crown (of reeds?) on his head, with what seems like a nymph holding a cornucopia standing over him. Tiberinus would be a logical candidate given (what seems like) the depiction of Mars and Rhea Silvia next to him, and in interpreted as such by Carandini and Cappelli, Le Gall however feels that the Numicus, the Anio or even a source in the *lucus* where Mars seduced Rhea Silvia might also be possibilities. Carandini (2000) 161, Le Gall (1953) 27.

A similar god makes his appearance in Pompeii, where a fresco in the Casa delle Origine di Roma, depicts a river god, once again in the same, crowded scene and once again carrying reeds.[13] The painting has been dated to the approximate period of 54 to 30 B.C.[14] It was accompanied in Pompeii by four small frescoes of the local river Sarno, found in a private bathhouse and on a number of lararia.[15] It is surprising to note that these early artistic depictions of Roman river deities all come from a relatively private sphere, with no overt connections to central authority either in Rome or Pompeii, though things might have been different in Egypt. Though Tiberinus plays an important role in the foundation myth of Rome, the god hardly plays a central role in these frescoes. Yet they show a clearly established iconographic tradition and setting, directly adapted from the Hellenistic model. The artists and commissioners responsible for the paintings were obviously aware of the Hellenic river god type, suggesting that such images were more current or at least well-known than the archaeological records reveals. A possible catalyst could have been the triumphal procession of Julius Caesar, which would have coincided with the first known depiction(s) of the Tiber. Caesar's triumph featured a number of river deities. According to the 2nd-century poet and historian Florus, Julius Caesar had a statue of the Nile carried on a litter during his triumphal procession in Rome, accompanied by other geographical representations including the Rhine, the Rhône and Oceanus.[16] These temporary images of river deities will receive detailed treatment in chapter four. At this point however, we might note the role they played in further familiarizing a Roman audience with the personifications of rivers as well as giving them a uniquely Roman context.

At the start of the imperial era, there is no marked increase in river god imagery, though the deities do seem to have peeked imperial interest. Possibly inspired by the classical Greek pediments, the pediment of the Augustan temple of Mars Ultor also bore an image of the Tiber. That much is at least suggested by a depiction of the temple on the Claudian *Ara Pietatis Augustae*, now in the Villa Medici, where a reclining male appears in the right corner, with a bushel of reeds in his hand (figure 3).[17] In early imperial times, the Nile, much like the Tiber, still only receives scant attention in both private and public art. One category of art flourishes in this period however: Nile mosaics. These mosaics depicted Nilotic landscapes filled with highly stereotyped versions of the people and animals living along the rivers' banks. By virtue of depicting the same river, Nile mosaics are certainly related to river god art. Among 42 Nilotic landscapes, in mosaic and painting, were recovered from Pompeii, Herculaneum and Oplontis, yet none of these depict the actual river deity, which seems to be a much later, second century phenomenon.[18] We do however know of a single statue of the Nile god, from the house of D. Octavianus Quartio.[19] This statuette was found among Egyptianizing artworks and stood at the edge of a basin which, through the help of miniature sluice gates, could mimic the Niles' flood. Coinage proved a more popular venue for river god imagery.

[13] Given the context, Tiberinus would be the logical candidate, if not for one surprising twist: the god in question is depicted beardless, as a young man; Carandini and Capelli suggest an identification as the Velabrum, which was considered a branch of the Tiber. See Carandini (2000) 171.

[14] Klementa (1993) 66.

[15] Klementa (1993) 129-132.

[16] Florus, *Epitome*, 2.13.88.

[17] LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.1: no.12, Klementa (1993) 58.

[18] See Versluys (2002) 90-170 for a full catalogue.

[19] Klementa (1993) 13.

In Egypt the Alexandrians maintained the right to strike their own coins within the newly formed empire and under Augustus, Claudius and Nero chose to depict crowned busts of the Nile deity as the emblem of their city.[20] A further coin issue minted under Nero in Rome and celebrating his building activities at the Ostian harbour, has been interpreted as depicting Tiberinus, since the reclining figure present in the scene holds a rudder, though personally I highly doubt this interpretation.[21] Yet the other major rivers of Europe and Asia, some like the Rhine, Danube and Euphrates even being the theatres of war, receive no further artistic treatment in this period whatsoever within the Roman world.

### 1.2 – *Surge: the Flavians*

From the Flavian dynasty onwards, there is a marked rise in the number of river god artworks. Tiberinus had not been depicted by imperial artists since the construction of the temple of Mars Ultor. Now, Rome's river deity starts to appear on coins and friezes and appears in some high-quality artworks. The mythological importance of the river is never severed. Yet, there is a subtle change: Tiberinus starts appearing as a more important element within the overall composition of works – coins, reliefs or otherwise – referring to the foundation of Rome, or, for the first time, starts appearing in his own right. A Vespasian sestertius from 71 A.D. shows Roma leaning on the seven hills of Rome with Tiberinus at her feet.[22] There is no radical departure from earlier tradition, as the she-wolf with suckling twins is still present in the scene. But this sestertius does seem to be the first occasion where Tiberinus appears on coinage and is used as a reference to the whole of Rome and its landscape. The depicted coin was found in Tarraco, modern day Spanish Tarragona; *if* the symbolism on the coin was minted with an eye towards empire-wide distribution, apparently Tiberinus was just as recognizable a symbol for the city as Roma or the she-wolf.

It is under Domitian however, that the god really starts appearing in his own right, and in new forms. First there is the well-known Marforio statue, now in the courtyard of the Capitoline museum which has been reinterpreted with some security as a statue of Tiberinus.[23] It may have been commissioned under Domitian, it may be an earlier piece of either his father or his brother. It seems to have been originally located on the Forum Romanum, or at least it was reported as being there in the Italian

[20] Geiβen (1974) 24, 98-99, 156.

[21] LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.1: no. 20. Given the fact that the reclining male is accompanied by a dolphin – highly unusual in river god iconography, completely unknown in other depictions of the Tiber – as well as the occasion of this coin being struck, makes an identification with either Oceanus or Portus in my opinion far more likely.

[22] LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.1: no.25.

[23] The statue has in the past been interpreted as Oceanus, in the 16th century when it was restored and given its marine attributes. As Klementina notes however, the pose and expression of the statue are far more serene than the usual Roman depictions of Oceanus or similar sea-deities. The treatment of hair and body betray a number of stylistic similarities to the Nile statue found at Domitian's Castel Gandolfo villa; coupled with the fact that the statue bears a striking resemblance to the depiction of the Jordan on the arch of Titus, built in 82 A.D., makes a Flavian date the likeliest. Given the colossal size of the statue the only viable option for a river god in this setting is Tiberinus. Klementa (1993) 135-137, citing several other authors in agreement with her. Other options under consideration were Mars and Jupiter. No statue I have come across of either Mars of Jupiter depicts the god in such a position. This is not even mentioning the overwhelming similarities with other river god imagery which the statue displays.

itinerary by the anonymous author from Einsiedeln, written in the early Middle Ages.[24] A small canal was cut underneath the god's left leg and a large hole is visible between left arm and chest, both indicating that water may have flown from the statue and that it was part of a fountain or a nymphaeum. If the god had indeed been originally placed on the Forum, this, together with the statue's colossal size, would have given Tiberinus a striking visual presence in the centre of Rome, tying the god to the symbolic heart of the city.
Domitian was the first to place himself in direct contact with a river deity on a series of dupondius dating from the Secular Games of 88 A.D.[25] These show the emperor, accompanied by two musicians, performing sacrifice in front of a (generic) temple, whilst being observed by Tiberinus holding a cornucopia. The message of piety is also evoked by a second depiction of Tiberinus dating towards the end of Domitian's reign. Here the god appears on the sculptured frieze of the Forum Transitorum where he is depicted together with two unknown figures, one possibly the god Fons or Semo Sancus Dius Fidus.[26] Both figures are approached by a man with arms outstretched in adoration, a figure which has been interpreted as symbolic for the lower strata of Roman society.[27]

The Tiber receives similar pious treatment outside of Rome. The remains of a pediment of white sandstone depict Mercury-Augustus, Mars and Venus, accompanied in the corners by two river gods.[28] Given Cologne's position along the Rhine, one is easily explained. Klementa suggests that, given the modest size of the pediment, it would most likely have been a private copy of the tympanum of a larger temple located within the city and dedicated (in part) to the imperial cult; in itself the figures on the tympanum echo those of Augustus' temple to Mars Ultor.[29] The connection with the imperial cult makes the second river god most likely a depiction of Tiberinus: surprisingly far from the capital and yet, through the imperial cult, still closely connected to imperial power.

The Flavians were not just enamoured by their own Father Tiber, but also showed particular interest in the Nile. Among the artistic events of Vespasians' reign, was the transfer of a grey-wacke statue of the Nile from Alexandria to Rome, to be placed in his Temple of Peace. The statue, as well as its size and the material it was made of, was enough for Pliny to give it special mention in his Natural History.[30] Beyond this mention, no trace of the sculpture remains. Domitian seems to have been inspired by his father's acquisition since we know of two very high-quality statues of the Nile originate which originated during his reign, one of which was found on the terrain of his Villa Albana (figure 4).[31] Since both statues were removed from the site without cataloguing and can only be

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[24] Klementa (1993) 135; though the statue could of course have been moved around during the Roman period. See for example the Trajanic rivergods now on the Capitoline, below.

[25] LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.1: no. 26.

[26] D'Ambra (1993) 64-65.

[27] D'Ambra (1993) 64-66.

[28] Klementa (1993) 58-60.

[29] Klementa (1993) 59. The exact dating of the relief is unknown, but falls somewhere within the first century A.D., possibly to be connected to the temple of Mercury the Augustales founded in Cologne during the reign of Titus.

[30] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 36.58.

[31] The first statue, carved from *bigio moratio*, was found near modern-day Castel Gandolfo and was for some time in the possession of the Barberini family. The second, carved from basalt and with its original location unknown, is first attested in the care of Marcel de'Corvi. Both share strong stylistic similarities and can be

connected to Domitian on the basis of their stylistic characteristics, their original placement is unknown. The one found at the site of his villa might have stood in an "Egyptian garden", similar to the small statuette of the Nile in Pompeii.

Besides statuary it is again coinage which proves a particularly popular format for river god imagery. Alexandrians continue their use of the Nile as the city's emblem during the tumultuous year after the death of Nero, as well as under Vespasian and Domitian. Besides these regular coin series, which continue on until halfway through the third century, a new type of coin starts to appear in Alexandria and its surroundings (figure 5). A series of tetradrachmas dating to the years 86/87 A.D. depicts the emperor Domitian with laurel crown with the words *Autokrator Kaisar Domitianos Sebastos Germanikos*. The reverse shows the image of the river Nile, bearded and reclining. With his left arm, in which he carries a bushel of grain, the god leans on a hippopotamus; in his right arm he holds a cornucopia.[32] As with the Tiber-dupondius of almost a year later, this is the first time an emperor is portrayed together with the Nile. More remarkable still is the fact that the Nile deity is surrounded by 16 small figures, presumably putti. These putti are traditionally interpreted as signifying the perfect level of flooding for the Nile: 16 cubits in height. The coin bears striking similarity with Pliny's description of the statue in the Temple of Peace. Whether the Nile with putti on Alexandrian coinage was an intentional copy of the grey-wacke statue now in Rome, or whether both stemmed from a native tradition of depicting the Nile, is unknown. The emperor-with-Nile would be further repeated in the same year with another series of tetradrachms and in 92/93 A.D. with a series of bronze coinage.[33]

Under Domitian the Rhine was, on several occasions, the theatre of war and following his adventures in the German lands the emperor also chose to depict the river in markedly militaristic fashion. To honour his victories against the Chatti in 83 A.D. and 88/89 A.D., the emperor had a colossal equestrian statue of himself erected on the Roman forum, our only testimony of which is Statius' *Silvae* 1.1.50-51. The statue depicted the emperor on horseback, bearing a statuette of Minerva in his left hand, while raising his right. The Rhine was depicted underneath with Domitian's horse trampling on the river's dishevelled hair. A similar image can be found on a sestertius dating to approximately 85-89 A.D., showing the Rhine reclining on an urn, with the emperor standing next to his left in full military garb and carrying a spear and dagger.[34]

A last mention should go to the Jordan, depicted on the Arch of Titus, built under Domitian to commemorate the Flavian victory over the Jews in 70 A.D. (figure 6). The image appears on the small frieze, above the architrave on the east side of the arch.[35] The river is depicted not as a part of the geography of Judea, but as part of a triumph, being carried around on a litter within the triumphal procession.

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dated to Flavian times through comparisons with, amongst other, decorative remains from Domitian's palace on the Palantine. See Klementa (1993) 14-16. Both statues were heavily restored during the Renaissance, though remains of the original attributes of the god make it clear that this is indeed the Nile.

[32] Görg (1988) 75.

[33] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.11, 20.

[34] LIMC *Rhenus* 7.1: no.11.

[35] Klementa (1993) 108-109.

## 1.3 – *Flood: the second century*

### 1.3.1 *Trajan*

Nerva's reign presents us with no notable depictions of river deities, leaving aside the frieze of the Forum Transitorum. His successor, however, more than made up for the lack of attention. High-point of the diverse and abundant river god imagery under Trajan are the two colossal Capitoline river gods, currently adorning the staircase of the Palazzo Senatorio (figures 7 and 8). The Nile can be identified (through the original sphinx on which it is leaning) and dated to the Trajanic period with relative security. The identity of its counterpart, clearly from the same period, is however far less certain. The Tiber seems by far the most logical choice, though based on circumstantial evidence[36] They might have been part of a large nymphaeum on the Esquiline before being moved to the Serapeum on the Quirinal under the Severans.[37] Next to this colossal statue, the Tiber also appears on a sestertius minted in 109 A.D., possibly to honour the completion of an aqueduct to Transtiberim.[38]

Next to the monumental work mentioned above, three other statues of the Nile were found in Rome dating to the same period, though on a smaller scale. It is unknown where these statues originated from.[39] A fourth Trajanic example was found in Igabrum, near modern Cordoba.[40] This statue was made from fine-grained Italian marble, possibly in an Italian workshop. It bears a curious inscription: *T. Flavius Vi(ct)or Colleg(io) (S)illychiniario(ru)m Prati Novi d(onum dedit).* According to A. Blanco-Freijeiro this means the statue was dedicated by a newly formed bakers' guild.[41] Trajan had allowed the bakers in Rome to organize themselves in collegia. The same regulation might have been applied in Igabrum at some point during his reign. This new Trajanic regulation might also be a possible explanation for some of the sculptures found in Rome, where the new bakers' collegia might have pooled their resources to set up a statue of the Nile. The sculptures from Rome however lack inscriptions, and might as well have served other purposes.

The bakers of Igabrum were not alone in their veneration of the Nile. The municipal authorities of Alexandria continued their use of the Nile on the city's coinage, while Trajan continued Domitian's innovation of depicting himself alongside the Nile deity. A notable number of bronze coinage have

[36] Klementa (1993) 138-141. The wolf and twins with which the river is depicted were added during 16th-century restoration works, the debate whether this sculpture depicts the Tiber or the Tigris goes back to the same period. Part of the she-wolf sculpture on which the god leans is of Roman date, and thus it is certain that the god leaned on a predatory animal of some sort: whether she-wolf or tiger is impossible to tell. Given historical circumstances however, the Tiber seems a more logical choice, though based on circumstantial evidence. Depictions of the Tigris are rare and are on a far smaller scale when they do occur (coinage, mosaics), which would make this statue a striking exception. The Tigris was of course the stage for Trajan's military campaign in the east, but there is no documented connection between the Tigris and the Nile. This is definitely not the case for the Tiber and the Nile.

[37] Du Jardin (1932) 47.

[38] Ostrowski (1991) 53-54, though noting that the god depicted might also be the Anio.

[39] Klementa (1993) 16-21.

[40] Klementa (1993) 16, 18.

[41] Blanco-Freijeiro (1971) 251-256.

survived, dating to the periods 98-101 and 107-117 A.D. (image 9).[42] What is particularly striking in this period, is a renewed level of experimentation by the city's mint. The Nile god still adheres to the general river god type, but is depicted with a number of new elements such as crocodiles, hippopotami or lotus buds.[43] Such elements were of course already part of other artistic works from other parts of the empire, notably local Egyptian artworks as well as the Italian Nile-mosaics, but now appear for the first time on Alexandrian coinage.

Similar experimentation took place in connection with the Danube, the Tigris and the Euphrates. All three rivers saw considerable military action during Trajan's long reign and leave their first traces in Roman imperial art. The Danube first appears on an aureus from 105-111 A.D., minted in Rome (figure 10). Le Gall mentions another, more unusual depiction: a sestertius showing a standing male, with flowing mantle and bushel of reeds in hand, trampling a female figure lying prostate.[44] The female figure has been identified as Dacia, the male as the Danube.[45] The conquest of Dacia was of course celebrated in monumental style by means of Trajan's column, which also depicts the Danube. Here, the god is gazing on from underneath his new bridge, looking passively at the Roman troops marching across. A similar relief was found on the Dacian border as well, on a now faded relief located at the actual site of the bridge, where the river god was accompanied by an inscription commemorating its construction.[46] The Euphrates and Tigris meanwhile were depicted on a sestertius from 116-117 A.D. after Trajan's victories in Mesopotamia.[47]

### 1.3.2 *Hadrian*

River god imagery continued unabated under Hadrian. Among the artistic highpoints of all river god depictions are two over life-sized statues of the Tiber and the Nile, the first currently in the Louvre, the second in the Vatican Museums (figures 12 and 13). Pose, style, and size of both statues indicate beyond doubt that they were conceived as a single project while abundant iconography makes identification clear. Both statues once graced the Iseum on the Campus Martius and are presumably of late Hadrianic date, though as with other artworks there is little certainty.[48]

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[42] Nile without emperor: Geiβen (1974) 594, 663, 686-688, 707. Emperor and Nile: Geiβen (1974) 440-444, 448, 476, 505-509, 560, 622, 652, 677-678, 694-696, 716; LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 51-52.

[43] Boneau (1964) 343.

[44] Le Gall (1953) 29.

[45] Though Le Gall opinions that it is the Tiber, not the Danube, that is depicted here, arguing that the image of the river trampling its own land would not make sense. However, this coin might be a reference to the building of the great Danube bridge, which allowed Trajan to invade Dacia in the first place.

[46] LIMC *Danuvius* 3.1: no.2.

[47] LIMC *Euphrates* 4.1: no. 21.

[48] See Lembke (1994) 69, Klementa (1993) 24-28. Together with much of the rest of the area, the Iseum was ravaged by fire in 80 A.D. prompting Domitian to rebuild the sanctuary. This has led Le Gall (cited by Lembke) to date both statues to the Flavian age. Yet the strong stylistic differences with other Flavian artworks, as well as the strong similarities with pieces from the late Hadrianic/early Antonine period, convinced Klementa to date both to the Hadrianic era, in which I follow her. To the artistic considerations I would add that the river god statues were possibly part of a "renovation" of this part of the sanctuary under Hadrian, which would further strengthen the case for a Hadrianic date of creation. The niche dedicated to Antinoös was most likely

The pairing of Tiber and Nile might have been of personal interest to Hadrian: a second pair was found at the emperor's villa near Tivoli (figures 14 and 15).[49] Though both Nile and Tiber suffered damage, the iconography once again makes identification clear. Both were set up within along the path leading to the "Canopus". The exact provenance of the Tiberinus now in the Villa d' Este, which seems to have been directly inspired by the Tiber from the Iseum, is, on the other hand, difficult to ascertain.[50] It formerly belonged to the Palazzo Corsini collection in Rome; whether this means the statue was found in Rome or at Hadrian's villa is impossible to tell.[51]

Depiction of the Tiber god again spread outside of Rome. At Ostia, a statue of a river god was found in the local Serapeum. Identification is unclear, but considering Ostia's position along the Tiber as well as the relatively slim body makes Tiberinus the current consensus.[52] The god appears a second time within a religious setting in Ostia, this time on the so-called Ostia-altar, cubic and just over 1 meter high. The names of the consuls carved on the altar make a date of 124 A.D. certain, when it was dedicated to Silvanus by a local freedman.[53]

As with his predecessor, the interest of Hadrian's subjects in the Nile continued unabashed, possibly even inspired by the Iseum-Nile. Klementa dates four statuettes, all made of white marble and of unknown origin, to the same late Hadrianic period on the basis of their stylistic similarities to the Vatican Nile.[54] The life-sized statue of the Nile now in the Atrium of the Torso Belvedere, also in the Vatican, is a particularly remarkable addition to this group of Hadrianic river god imagery (figure 16). The god is hewn from dark *bigio venato*, with a head of black marble.[55] Hadrian, who made no secret of his love of travel and the exotic, had the image of the Nile minted on several series of aurea in the years 134-138 A.D., not in Egypt but in Rome itself.[56] Bronze coinage from Alexandria from the entire period of 117 to 135 A.D. depicts both the emperor with the Nile, as well as the Nile alone.[57]

The emperor's relatively peaceful reign also meant that the rivers which suddenly appeared in artistic works under Trajan again disappear from the iconographical record, with the exception of a single mosaic. The mosaic, the first archeologically attested example of a river in mosaic format, was found

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constructed under Hadrian's reign, and colossal "Madame Lucrezia", which has been identified by Lembke as a Hadrianic statue of Isis, might also have belonged to the sanctuary. See Lembke (1994) 70, 220-221.

[49] Raedar (1983) 89.

[50] Klementa (1993) 55-57.

[51] The head and neck of the statue are restorations, as is the larger part of the rudder; the she-wolf however is original, making the identification as Tiberinus certain. Whether there was a similar Nile-statue to accompany the above Tiber is unknown.

[52] Klementa (1993) 53-54.

[53] It should be noted however that Klementa is of the opinion that the original piece was commissioned under the Flavians, and was reused at the later date mentioned above, Klementa (1993) 63.

[54] Klementa (1993) 24-30.

[55] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 15, Klementa (1993) 22-24.

[56] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.3, 26.

[57] *Emperor with Nile on reverse*: Geiβen (1978) 760, 797, 845, 867, 886, 990-991, 1063-1064, 1126, 1184, 1205. *Emperor with Nile and Euthenia on reverse*: LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 64; *Nile alone*: Geiβen (1978) 747, 772, 830-831, 911, 1147-1148.

in a triclinium of a villa in Antioch. It depicts both rivers as part of a larger set of mosaics depicting the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe.[58]

### 1.3.3 *The Antonine emperors*

In the reign of Antoninus Pius, a number of sestertii and medallions series were issued depicting the Tiber god, yet large-scale artworks as under Domitian, Trajan or Hadrian are rare.[59] All of them show the Tiber in the typical reclining position, but with a new attribute: a ships' prow. A medallion from the period 140-143 A.D. depicts a somewhat more unusual scene: next to the river god a bridge rises while a snake is seen swimming towards a group of buildings in the background (figure 17). The most likely explanation is that this is a reference to the introduction of the cult of Asclepius in Rome in 293 B.C.: a snake brought from Epidauros on arrival in the city immediately left the ship it was on to swim towards the Tiber island, where the temple to Asclepius was accordingly built. The so-called Palazzo Rondanini relief, made from white marble, depicts the same legend and in much the same composition. It is usually dated to the Antonine period – more specifically the reign of Antoninus Pius – on stylistic basis.[60] Its provenance is unknown, but it has been suggested that the relief was part of the decoration of the temple of Asclepius on the Tiber island, given its subject matter. Both the relief and the medallion series tie into the 900$^{th}$ anniversary of the founding of the city, which fell during the reign of Antoninus Pius and was duly celebrated by the emperor.[61] This iconographic program was enriched by a very special series of bronze coinage from Alexandria (figure 18). Struck in 143-144 A.D., it shows the Tiber and Nile in upright position, shaking hands. The meaning of this peculiar scene is clear: Tiber and Nile, Rome and Alexandria in harmonious cooperation under Antoninus Pius.[62] The series of numismatic depictions finds their final expression under Marcus Aurelius, depicting Tiberinus in his usual setting, with the prow of a ship and a bushel of reeds, dating from 174-175 A.D., as well as a medallion series dating to 180 A.D. in the same format but with a bridge in the background.[63] Lastly, there is the Parthian Monument from Ephesus, erected after the Parthian victories of Lucius Verus. The monument depicts a long row of personified cities, either already important to the empire or newly conquered by Lucius Verus. The Tiber appears in the centre of the row of reliefs, next to Roma, the emperor and the she-wolf with suckling twins, while the Nile is depicted together with Alexandria.[64]

As shown in Ephesus, the Nile remained the Alexandrian emblem *par excellence* and the emperors continued to have their image minted on coins together with the river deity.[65] The latter tradition

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[58] LIMC *Tigris* 8.1: no.1.

[59] *Sestertii:* LIMC *Tiberinus* 8: no. 21a. *Medallions*: LIMC *Tiberinus* 8: no. 21b, 23, 24.

[60] Toynbee (1967) 114, followed by D'Ambra (1993) 64, while Le Gall (1953) 26-27 preaches caution and note that the original dimensions and provenance of the relief are unknown, making any exact dating difficult.

[61] Ostroswki (1991) 55.

[62] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.48.

[63] LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.1: no. 21 c, d.

[64] Ostrowski (1991) 55-56.

[65] *Antoninus Pius*: emperor with Nile: Geiβen (1978) 1307-1308, 1356, 1449, 1522, 1593-1595, 1638-1640, 1731, 1783-1785, 1817-1820, 1909, 1923-1924, 1978-1979. Nile alone Geiβen (1978), 1400-1401, 1519, 1649, 1730. *Marcus Aurelius*: emperor with Nile: Geiβen (1981) 2047-2048. Nile alone Geiβen (1981) 2068-2069,

however slowly seems to fall out of favour towards the end of the second century. The Nile also seems to have become somewhat less fashionable for private Romans of the latter half of the second century: only two statues are known from this period, both somewhat under life-sized.[66] Instead of sculpture, mosaics depicting the god grow in popularity. Though we already encountered large quantities of Nilotic scenes in Pompeii, the Nile god only starts to appear in the archaeological records of mosaics from the Antonine period onwards. A notable early, polychrome example was found in the House of the Mithraeum in Merida, depicting a complex cosmological scene. Both Nile and Euphrates are depicted and even labelled (figure 19).[67] From the same time period are a heavily damaged polychrome mosaic from Carthage, depicting the Nile god with the usual cornucopia and a number of crocodiles, as well as one from Cordoba depicting the Nile with overturned urn, crocodile, ibises and a hippopotamus.[68] Finally, a further unique find from Rome depicts the river on a column base, in the middle of a typical Nilotic landscape and dated to the early Antonine period.[69]

The same Parthian victory which gave us the Parthian Monument in Ephesus was reason to mint a medallion series in Rome, in the years 167-169 A.D., depicting both Tigris and Euphrates at the feet of a victorious Lucius Verus.[70] Similarly, the Danube makes a brief appearance on Marcus Aurelius' column as a result of his wars against the Marcomanni.[71]

### 1.4 – *Drought: from the end of the second century to the end of antiquity*

Depictions of Tiberinus become a rarity towards the end of the second century. First there is the well-known Ara Casali, possibly a misnomer since it has been suggested that it is in fact a statue base.[72] Here the god appears thrice, in each case connected to the birth of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome. Instead of large-scale artworks, the god now appears on personal sarcophagi (figure 20). Two of these, now in the possession of the Vatican museums, show Tiberinus in much the same setting as the Ara Casali: observing the myth-cycle of Rhea Silvia and her twins, still in the same iconographical style. Like the late Republican columbarium fresco, the Tiber almost disappears in the crowded scenes on both sarcophagi. Both belong to the first half of the third century.[73] Except for these three depictions, the Tiber deity disappears completely from the imperial iconographic repertoire, with one notable exception: on Constantine's Arch, dedicated in 315, the Tiber appears on a number of occasions. The river god is depicted observing the battle at the Milvian bridge on the lower right frieze on the southern side of the monument, and possibly beneath the emperor's

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LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.63. *Lucius Verus*: emperor with Nile: LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.41. *Commodus*: Nile alone: Geiβen (1981) 2215-2216, 2222, 2224, 2253.

[66] Klementa (1993) 30-33.

[67] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.38.

[68] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.19, 25.

[69] Klementa (1993) 34-35.

[70] LIMC *Euphrates* 4.1: no.22.

[71] LIMC *Danuvius* 3.1: no.3.

[72] Klementa (1993) 63, noting that such a rich sculptural decoration is rare on altars and more far more usual for statuebases. On the basis of the lettering of its dedication by T. Claudius Faventinus, she dates it towards the end of the second century.

[73] Ostrowski (1991) 37.

quadriga together with Sol and Luna in the two tondo's on the western and eastern sides.[74] By this time, the Tiber has become highly standardized, without any identifiable attributes.

The Nile seems less affected. Under Septimus Severus, the god was depicted on bronze coinage minted in Rome.[75] In Alexandria, the Severan emperors continued the tradition of depicting themselves together with the Nile on imperial coinage while the Alexandrians continued to depict their river on local currency.[76] On a very well-preserved mosaic from Leptis Magna, the Nile appears riding a hippopotamus, together with putti, two prominently placed young women, priests, exotic plants and a Nilometer.[77] Among the very last depictions of the god is a small white marble statuette, with the usual cornucopia and a crocodile, found in Alexandria and dating to the third century.[78] The last known relief of the Nile was found on a mid-third century column base, where the Nile god is accompanied by Isis, the Apis-bull and other Egyptian deities.[79]

As with Trajan and Lucius Verus, the Euphrates and Tigris appear only in the context of military activity in the east. Alexander Severus, after his triumph against the Parthians in 233, had a medallion minted in Rome depicting the emperor flanked by Victory, trampling the two Mesopotamian rivers.[80] Almost the exact same scheme was used by Gallienus after his victory over de Parthians in 262 A.D. (figure 22).[81] Yet it is not just emperors who commissioned images of the Euphrates. In current day Mass'oudiye, the Euphrates appears alone on a mosaic dated to 228-229 A.D. The river is labelled with the title "Euphrates, king of rivers", flanked by personifications of Syria and Mesopotamia.[82] The general disappearance of river deities equally affects the Danube. The last known depictions of the god are on a small altar from Vindobona, dated to 233 A.D., as well as a Constantinian medallion of almost a century later which celebrates the emperor's triumph over barbarian forces.[83]

River gods do not disappear altogether, they do, however, become very rare. Late examples include the medallion minted by Gallienus mentioned above, Alexandrian coins depicting emperors Gordianus I and III together with the Nile deity, and a series of small bronze tokens minted by Julianos II in Rome depicting the Nile deity.[84]

[74] Ostrowski (1991) 59, though given the more cosmic personifications of the tondo's, the water deity depicted might just as well be Oceanus.

[75] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.10.

[76] *Elagabalus*: emperor with Nile: Geiβen (1981) 2322, 2397, Nile alone: Geiβen (1981) 2321. *Alexander Severus*: emperor with Nile: Geiβen (1981) 2411, 2519, Nile alone: Geiβen (1981) 2410, 2460, 2470.

[77] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no.45.

[78] LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 17.

[79] Klementa (1993) 34-35.

[80] LIMC *Euphrates* 4.1:no. 23.

[81] LIMC *Euphrates* 4.1:no. 24.

[82] LIMC *Euphrates* 4.1: no. 4.

[83] LIMC *Danuvius* 3.1: no. 4, 9.

[84] *Gordianus I*: Geiβen (1981) 2603. *Gordianus III*: Geiβen (1981) 2628-2629, 2647, 2659. *Julianos II*: LIMC *Neilos* 6.1: no. 27.

## 1.5 – *Murky waters*

Though extensive, the selection above makes no claim to be a complete list of the river deities portrayed in imperial art. Firstly, there is a large body of river god artworks, scattered throughout the empire and sometimes even of high quality workmanship and on considerable scale, which defies identification (figures 23 and 24). The reasons for this are varied. Rarely, the original artwork does not seem to have been equipped with any individual attributes, such as a sphinx or a she-wolf. Perhaps the setting of the artwork would have made it clear to the intended audience which river was depicted, if it was the artist's goal to depict an individual river to begin with. In the vast majority of cases however, especially in the case of sculptures, the artworks are simply too damaged to be identified. As with the majority of other river god artworks, their place of provenance is rarely recorded, making identity and function even more difficult to discern. Lastly, creative restoration work, mostly dating to the early modern period, is a further hurdle to accurately identifying not just a river god's identity, but also its date of origin.[85] Klementa notes some 41 examples of artworks depicting unidentifiable river deities, 2 of which are dated to the late first century, 28 to the second century, 7 to the general period of the second or third century, and 4 to the third century exclusively.[86] Of these unidentifiable artworks, 32 are sculptures varying in size from statuettes to just over-life-sized artworks, 4 are sarcophagi, 3 reliefs and 2 mosaics. This category is comprised of a wide range of artworks, from high-quality, colossal sculptures[87] to small reliefs[88].

Next to these unidentifiable artworks, there is a considerable corpus of "smaller" river deities. They share the characteristics of the other river god imagery mentioned in this chapter, and shall therefore not be treated here in detail.[89] These artistic depictions tie in with the numismatic appearances of such smaller rivers on coins minted by small and large cities alike, especially from the eastern part of the empire. Examples include the Rhyndakos, Amenanos or Kaleon: of little importance to the empire at large, but of great importance to local communities. The list is of these

[85] The reworked Marforio and the Trajanic Tigris/Tiber, both on the Capitoline Hill, were already mentioned above. Another well-known example is the "Tigris" in Cortile del Belvedere, which was completely reworked under the supervision of none other than Michelangelo.

[86] For the full catalogue: Klementa (1993) 146-193.

[87] Two Ephesan river gods found in situ near the frigidarium of the so-called Vediusgymnasium, Klementa (1993) 146-150.

[88] About 0,36 meters in height and found near the Roman road leading to Oberwinter, Klementa (1993) 179-180.

[89] Klementa (1993) 109-134: artistic depictions are known of the Meander (two second century statues from Miletos), Eridanos (11 sarcophogi dating from the late second and third century), Skamander (a second century statue found in Illium Novum), Ladon (a third century mosaic from Antioch), Pyramos ("incorrectly" depicted as the lover of Thisbe on a third century mosaic from Nea Paphos), Peneios (on a mosaic from the same third century villa as the Pyramos), Eurotas (from a third century mosaic in a gymnasium on the island of Salamis), Orontes (on an early third century mosaic from Damascus), Anio (a statuette found in Tivoli, presumably from a water sanctuary dated to the imperial period), Arno (on a second to third century relief from the forum of Roman Florence), Etsch (a unique bronze statuette dated to somewhere within the imperial period, which might have been a copy of a local cult statue), Sarno (4 small fresco's in Pompeii with a *terminus ante quem* of 79 A.D.), Numicius (from the Late Republican columbarium which also gave us the first known depiction of the Tiber) and Mosel (on a monumental column found near the German Igel, dedicated as a funerary monument by two brothers from the local aristocracy, dated around 240 A.D.).

local rivers deities reaches into the dozens and is too numerous to treat in any detail here.[90] Two important trends within these local river depictions should be mentioned. Firstly, as mentioned, they all adhere to the canonical type of the reclining male, with typical attributes such as draped mantles, urns, rudders and bushels of reeds. One important stylistic difference with the larger rivers of the empire however, is that some of the local rivers are depicted as young men without beards. This seems to have been a matter of taste rather than of any symbolic meaning.[91] Some rivers, like the Glaukos or the Sarno, are depicted both as young men and bearded seniors, sometimes even in the same time period. Yet even more interesting than their iconographical unity, is the time period: the vast majority of both artworks and coinage dates to the late 2nd and the third century A.D.

### 1.6 – *Some preliminary conclusions*

Though dating back in their conception to Hellenistic times, the reclining river deities appear to have become a distinctly Roman phenomenon. Though Late Republican audiences seem to have been well-aware of this specific type of image, as evinced by the columbarium paintings, they received only sparing attention during this period and under the first emperors. The only place where river deities were consistently popular, seem to be on Alexandrian coinage. Under Vespasian, and especially his heir Domitian, river gods acquired a renewed popularity in Roman artworks, both private and public. It is interesting to note that river god imagery in the Flavian epoch seems closely connected to the imperial family itself: coinage en monumental sculpture in both public spaces and imperial villa's. This did not just happen in Rome: in Alexandria, the emperor was depicted together with the Nile deity. We know of few artworks commissioned by private individuals in this period. The connection between rulers and rivers continued throughout the second century and river deities became part of the standard numismatic repertoire. Cities only started making use of local river deities on their coinage from the end of the century onwards. Artistic depictions of the major rivers of the empire, especially the Nile and the Tiber, boomed in this same century. Some of these artworks were found in a setting and made on a scale to make some connection with building projects sponsored by the imperial dynasty likely – for example the colossal Trajanic Nile and "Tiber", or the Nile and Tiber from the Iseum Campense. Other, smaller sculptures and mosaics presumably originated with wealthy private individuals, or even groups such as the bakers' collegium in Cordoba.

The second century boom dried up somewhat at the end of the century. The Severans still made good use of river deities on for example imperial coinage, but it seems to a lesser degree than their predecessors. The decline would intensify during the third century. Meanwhile, local rivers become a popular choice for local coinage during the late second century and throughout the third century. Sculptural depictions drop, while river gods start to appear on mosaics and sarcophagi, where they generally play a small role in an densely populated artistic scheme. Even though they are not completely forgotten, as is evinced as late as Constantine's reign, they are however increasingly rare and increasingly stereotypical, with hardly any discernible attributes.

The temporal dimension of these artworks is more or less secure on the basis of stylistic similarities and differences. The same can't be said for the spatial context of most of these artworks. Currency,

[90] For a longer but not complete list with some 56 examples, together with testimonials, see Klementa (1993) p.189, n.498.

[91] Klementa (1993) 191.

painting and mosaics are usually found in their original location or can be traced to their place of origin. Sculptures, which form the bulk of river god imagery, are usually far more difficult to place. They are rarely found *in situ*, courtesy of the popularity of river god sculptures among art collectors of the early-modern period. Still, based on a number of more well-documented finds we can make an educated guess at the places where sculptures and mosaics were sited. By their very nature, river gods had an intimate relationship with water and as such were usually to be found as part of fountains, nymphaea, bathhouses and the like, both public and private. Yet even when we have some idea of their original setting, the context of that setting is rarely known. If we are to understand what such images meant to Roman audiences, beside their possible decorative value, it is to other areas of Roman culture we have to turn. The first and most obvious, is that of religion.

## Chapter 2 – Holy waters

The first chapter signalled a trend in imperial art which is at first difficult to explain. After all, if river god imagery was only decorative in nature, why does it show such a marked rise and decline where images of other traditional Roman gods do not? Religion at first might seem a strange place to start. A river god sculpture located in a Roman bathhouse was unlikely to be a place of cultic worship. Yet the religious importance of rivers is ambiguous and ambivalent, but certainly not non-existent. It is my opinion that the religious and metaphysical aspects of rivers within Roman culture should not be shoved aside so easily: they formed an important part of the mental framework in which these images were created and interpreted. This chapter will take us away from the actual river god images to explore Roman religious reception of rivers. This, I believe, explains a considerable part of the power and appeal such images had to a Roman audience. In the following chapter, I will show that these religious qualities flow not only from river deities' mythological importance or the prominence of their cults, but even more so from the important semi-divine properties which were attributes to their waters.

### 2.1 – *Mythology and local identity*

River gods were first and foremost an integral part of the Greco-Roman mythological landscape and a number of artworks mentioned above depict them in this role.[92] River gods were worshipped and enshrined in myth throughout the Greek world, starting with Homer's Skamandar in the 8$^{th}$ century B.C.[93] They were almost exclusively imagined to be male, with the strength and sexual vigour of a bull and were usually depicted as either zoomorphic (most notably Acheloös, a man-bull hybrid, who became a generic river god worshipped in many places) or, more rarely, completely anthropomorphic. Mythical founding heroes are often born near, or have a special bond with, a local river while the rivers themselves, together with nymphs, also often feature as emblems of local identity, no doubt inspired by their localized nature.[94]

Of the major rivers of the Roman Empire mentioned in the first chapter, only the Tiber developed a mythological cycle of his own.[95] Tiberinus protected a pregnant Rhea Silvia from drowning as well as watching over the young twins Romulus and Remus. Such a myth stands directly in line with the role river deities played in the Greek world. First mention of the Tiber god as a civic emblem of sorts goes back to the third century B.C., when Ennius calls upon 'Father Tiberinus' in his poetry, suggesting the role of a shared protective or guardian-like deity.[96] The Esquiline columbarium is our first known visual confirmation of the Tiber's role in Rome's foundation myth. Not surprisingly, the river's role in

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[92] See for example the Ara Casali and the Ostia-altar, the various depictions of the Tiber accompanied by she-wolf and twins, the various sarcophagi which almost unanimously depict the god in this setting, the Tiber-fresco from the columbarium on the Esquiline and a majority of the third century mosaics from the eastern part of the empire.

[93] Homer, *Illiad,* 5.77.

[94] Larson (2001) 121-126.

[95] The Nile, in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 722-746, was connected to the cycle of myths surrounding Io. Neither the Rhine, the Danube, the Euphrates or the Tigris receive, to my knowledge, anything more than passing acknowledgment within Greco-Roman mythology.

[96] "*pater Tiberine*" Ennius, fragment 51.

Rome's foundation became one of its defining features for many Romans. This development can be read as Rome partaking in the "international" Hellenistic discourse on civic identity in the first centuries B.C., as suggested by Meyers.[97] However river god imagery is comparatively rare in Hellenistic art, especially in the area of coinage where one would expect to find rivers depicted if they were popular symbols of civic identity.[98] They certainly show up as such in large numbers during the Classical Era, and as noted during the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. The Tiber also leaves few traces in the archaeological record before the Flavian era, which cannot wholly be attributed to an incomplete recording of finds.

The first time the god is clearly portrayed as an important element of Rome and an emblem of Roman identity, outside of the abovementioned frescoes, it is not in the form of a statue or coin. The god appears in a small but crucial role in the *Aeneid*. Virgil's use of Tiberinus deserves more detailed treatment. The poet conveniently highlights a number of characteristics which Romans associated with river deities in mythology and in cult, which would remain current long after his dead. Though his (much-read) epic, Virgil also gives the Tiber a renewed importance within Rome's foundation thereby promoting it as the most Roman of rivers not just by virtue of it streaming through the city but by being intimately tied up with the origin of that city as well.
On several occasions in the epic, the Tiber and Tiberinus are mentioned as the defining feature of Aeneas' final destination, reminding the hero of his destiny.[99] When he finally arrives on the shores of Italy, Virgil has the Trojan hero enter Latium via the mouth of the Tiber, which is depicted as a *locus amoenus*.[100] Earlier tradition stated that Aeneas arrived in Latium not via the mouth of the Tiber, but some twenty kilometres to the south, at modern day Pratica di Mare.[101] Virgil broke with this tradition to incorporate the river within his narrative, binding Aeneas and the Trojans to the Roman landscape by means of one of its most conspicuous landmarks. The location of this episode within the text is also noteworthy. Conspicuously placed directly in front of Virgil's introduction to the second part of his epic, it serves as a gateway. Here 'Aeneas' *Odyssey* is transformed into his *Iliad*'[102], as well as giving the Tiber river a place of central importance to the Latian landscape.
Having arrived in Latium, Aeneas falls asleep at the banks of the Tiber. Tiberinus appears and prophesizes the founding of Alba Longa, taking away any doubts the dreaming Aeneas may have upon awakening by sending a portent of a white sow with thirty piglets. Finally, the river god gives Aeneas the important advice of seeking an alliance against the Latins with the descendants of Evander, in which he will personally guide the Trojans, and of making a sacrifice to appease Juno. Only after having delivered his message, does Tiberinus reveal his identity and disappears 'into his

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[97] Meyers (2009).

[98] The one very notable exception being the image of the Orontes river carrying the Tyche of Antioch created by Eutychides which was well-known throughout the Hellenistic, where it was minted on Antiochese coins, and later in the Roman world. See LIMC *Antiocheia* 1.1. The image of a river god carrying the personification or the tyche of a city was repeated on several occasions during the empire, notably on coinage from Asia Minor as well as the Parthian Monument. Compared to the reclining river deities however, it is a rarity.

[99] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.13, 2.782, 3.500, 5. 797, 5.83.

[100] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 7.25-36.

[101] Fatham (2009) 52.

[102] Fatham (2009) 55.

deep pool, seeking the lowest depths'.[103] Virgil uses Tiberinus' prophecy to connect his *Aeneid* with other narratives, pointing to the cycle of myths concerning the founding of Alba Longa and, though extension, the founding of Rome which has indirectly been sanctified by the landscape itself in receiving the Trojans with open arms, and the renewed Romulus in the form of Aeneas' descendant Augustus. Turning to the actual text, we encounter a number of distinct descriptions of the river god himself:

'He dreamed that before him the very god of the placed, Tiberinus of the pleasant stream, raised his aged head amid the poplar leaves; fine linen draped him in a mantle of grey and shady reeds crowned his hair. Then thus he spoke to him, and took away his cares.'[104]

This anthropomorphic Tiberinus is the one which appears in the art works of chapter one, bearded and reclining. What Virgil presents us with here is a figure with *gravitas*, a senior councilor and advisor, as is fitting for the important prophecy the god is about to utter. This prophesying river is reminiscent of the Clitumnus as described by Pliny the Younger. The Clitumnus was clad in 'magistrate's bordered robe'[105] and surrounded by prophetic scrolls: a symbol of authority, advice and prophecy. Next, the god himself takes the word, and, after having given the message mentioned above, he describes himself in the following manner:

'To you will pay your tribute when victorious. I am he whom you see grazing my banks with full flood and cleaving the rich tilth – the blue Tiber, river best beloved of Heaven. Here is my mighty home; among lofty cities flows forth my fountainhead.'[106]

Tiberinus, in human-like form, describes his nature and actions as a river god in some strikingly non-anthropomorphic terms. Although he is not completely without anthropomorphic qualities, this blue Tiber *(caeruleus Thybris),* grazing its banks (*stringentem ripas),* is a *genius loci*, a divine spirit residing in or presiding over a natural feature of the landscape. The divine qualities of the waters themselves are further enhanced by the adjective *caeruleus*, which is usually reserved for water-related gods, Neptune in particular. This adjective is all the more striking because the Tiber is notoriously *flavus* (yellow, 'yellow with plenteous sand').[107] Finally as Aeneas speaks, after having woken up:

'(…) In whatever spring your water contains you as you pitty our travails, from whatever soil you flow forth in all you beauty, ever with my offerings, ever with my gifts, you will be graced, horned (*cornice*) stream, lord of Hesperian waters.'[108]

Important here is the one word *cornice*, 'horned'.[109] Where the larger part of the above passage fits in neatly with what has gone before, this one word evokes the Greek tradition of depicting river gods as zoomorphic (as bulls, generally with human heads), anthropomorphic (as horned men), or as

[103] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.66-67.
[104] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.31-35.
[105] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 8.8.
[106] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.61-65.
[107] Meyers (2009) 236-237, Virgil, *Aeneid*, 7.31.
[108] Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.74-78.
[109] Meyers (2009) 237.

shape-shifters who, like the river's waters, can take on several forms. A prominent example of such a bull-like river deity is Acheloös, whose cult peaked on the Greek mainland during archaic and classical times. As the extensive appearance of Acheloös in Ovidius' *Metamorphoses* shows, this particular river god was far from forgotten in Roman times.[110] Tiberinus on the other hand is never depicted or described as being horned, notwithstanding his cornucopia.[111]

## 2.2 – *Cult*

Virgil showed us a number of different ways to perceive the Tiber: as an anthropomorphic figure akin to other Olympians, as a *genius loci* at one with his waters and as a horned creature of Greek mythology. Through this literary play, Virgil not only gives the Tiber a renewed importance within Rome's founding by connecting him to Aeneas. His text also points towards Roman cultural perceptions of river deities beyond the world of literary *topoi*. Cults of river deities are well-attested during the Roman Empire, but the corpus of votive offerings, inscriptions and sanctuaries is, in general, very meagre compared to other deities. Ostia, lying at the mouth of the Tiber river, offers the most promising evidence for an actual cult of Tiberinus. The occupant of the temple on the Piazzale delle Corporazioni has long been a subject of debate. Ceres, Sarapis and Vulcanus have been suggested the past, but Rieger has recently made a case for Tiberinus. The temple, which was perhaps already planned in the Augustan era, was built no earlier than during the reign of Domitian. The podium of the structure featured a canal running alongside the cella walls. The water-theme is continued in a smaller basin flanking the stairs to the podium. An additional two large water basins, with some traces of marble decoration and a fountain installation, seem to date from the middle of the second century. All this points to the cult of a god with strong connections to (running) water. An inscription from roughly the same date as the two large water basins records the renovation of the '*cellam Patri Tiberino'*, alongside other renovation works, initiated by a P. Lucilius Gamala Junior.[112] Strengthening the case is the fact that Gamala paid for the restoration of the Tiberinus sanctuary out of public funds, while other sanctuaries are restored from his own funds. This can be connected to the watersystem around the Piazalle, which was in the hands of the *coloniae colonor(um) ost(iensium).*[113] Gamala could therefore tap into of the city's public funds for the building of the temple's two water basins. Other, indirect evidence points to the worship of Tiberinus on this site: the temple entrance faced a porticus giving direct access to the river and the docks; the merchants on the Piazzale (and the city as a whole) were dependant on the Tiber for their livelihood; fragments of the torso of a seated or reclining god were found near the temple.

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[110] For an extended Roman treatment of Acheloös, see Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8.547-9.88. Ovid's treatment of Acheloös is deeply ironic. The god, traditionally known for his virility, animalistic behavior and bull-like strength, is presented as a perfect aristocratic host: eloquent, cultured and pious. Further on, when fighting for the hand of Deianira, Acheloös uses eloquence and rhetoric to convince the girl's father, while the great civilizer Hercules flies into a fit of rage and attacks his competitor. See also Isler (1969) 119; on the popularity of the struggle between Hercules and Acheloös, see Isler (1969) n.4 for an extensive list of testimonia.

[111] The relationship between the cornucopia and the river god Acheloös was a uniquely Ovidian invention, *Metamorphoses*, 9.85-88. Other Roman authors are less specific about its origin, but all describe it as a *cornu*, or animal horn; see LIMC *Copia* 3.1.

[112] CIL 14.376, line 15; Rieger (2004) 244-247.

[113] Rieger (2004) 246.

Rieger's hypothesis might lack hard evidence, but is intriguing nonetheless. If she is right, the temple would be one of a kind: a sanctuary to a river deity of considerable size and in the centre of the city. In Rome, which attached such symbolic significance to the Tiber, there is far less evidence of a sanctuary to Tiberinus. With a large impact on city-life and the city economy, one would expect the Roman population and/or priesthoods to be rather preoccupied with appeasing their river deity, similar to the Nile in Egypt which we'll visit shortly. Actual evidence of the cult of Tiberinus is however rare. The Fasti Amiternini mentions a day dedicated to '*Tiberino in insula*', pointing to some sort of sanctuary to the god there.[114] Its dimensions are unknown, foundations have as of yet not been found. If it existed as a permanent structure, it could not have been very large, given the crowded topography of the Tiber-island. Further altars, inscriptions and votive offerings dedicated to, or even mentioning Tiberinus are very rare.[115]

The Danube and the Rhine are in fact better represented than the Tiber in the epigraphical record. Alongside the Danube, in the town of Risstissen, an ex-voto was found dedicated to the Danube. This is however only known from 19th-century descriptions, which make dating difficult. An altar from the Roman town of Vindobona (current-day Vienna) is dedicated to Neptune, the Danube and the Nymphs by a Roman veteran. The latter can be dated to 233 A.D.[116] If we are to believe the 4th century poet Claudian, this veteran was not alone. He describes the Goths as taking oaths by the Danube, 'whom he and his fathers worshipped', though in this case perhaps as a show of primitivism and barbarity for an increasingly Christian Roman audience.[117] The Rhine is mentioned as a god on a total of six inscriptions, found along the entire course of the river.[118] They date from the 130's (an altar from Strasbourg) to the late second century (CIL 13.5255, 7790, 7791) and the early 3rd (CIL 13.8810, 8811) century.[119] The Strasbourg altar is particularly interesting as it was dedicated by a local noble family. It refers to the Rhine as '*pater*', possibly in an imitation of the Tiber. Both the inscriptions near forts and the altar in Strasbourg point to river deities as a Roman phenomenon which found its way to frontier regions along the Rhine.

Again we know of no clearly identified sanctuary for either Danube or Rhine. This does not mean they have never existed. Pliny's well-known description of the sanctuary to the Clitumnus, which I already mentioned earlier, gives us some idea of the sanctuaries that might have existed in other places in the empire for both large rivers as well as smaller, local streams. Visiting the river's source, Pliny is amused by the 'coins which have been thrown in' the pool.[120] Near the source of his river, the river god had his temple where he predicted the future. The sanctuary attracted numerous pilgrims, who made their presence known by the many writings on the walls of the temple. Judging from Pliny's words ('most of them you will admire, but some will make you laugh'), seem to imply that not

[114] CIL 1.2.245.

[115] CIL 11.2.4644, an altar mentioned by a number of 17th and 18th century authors with conflicting accounts on the precise text on the piece. In all accounts however, the altar is dedicated to the 'sacred Tiberinus'. The other, CIL 6.773, dating to the time of Diocletianus, only mentions the deity in passing. It is only known from the medieval travelogue written by the Anonymus of Einsiedln.

[116] CIL 3.5863, 3.14359.27.

[117] Claudian, *De Bello Gothico*, 81.

[118] CIL 13.5255, 7790, 7791, 8810, 8811 and an altar described in Schnitzler and Schneider (1985) 110.

[119] CIL 13.5255 near Tasgeatium (Eschenz); CIL 13.8810 and 8811 near Fectio (Utrecht).

[120] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae,* 8.8.

all pilgrims were equally well-versed in Latin, perhaps signifying that the temple attracted worshippers from a very broad social spectrum. Another example of the sanctuaries of (smaller) rivers comes from Tacitus. After the Tiber flood of 15 A.D., which was particularly devastating, the senators Ateius Capito and Lucius Aruntius were given the task of finding a permanent solution to the river's flooding. After having done their research:

' […] a discussion was opened in the senate by Arruntius and Ateius, whether the invasions of the Tiber should be checked by altering the course of the rivers and lakes swelling its volume. Deputations from the municipalities and colonies were heard. (…) Nor were the Reatines silent: "(…) Consideration, too, should be paid to the faith of their fathers, who had hallowed rituals and groves and altars to their country streams. Besides, they were reluctant that Tiber himself, bereft of his tributary streams, should flow with diminished majesty." Whatever the deciding factor — the prayers of the colonies, the difficulty of the work, or superstition — the motion of Piso, "that nothing was to be changed," was agreed to.' [121]

Apparently, to the Reatines, the worship of their rivers was considered a valid argument against the damming of the Tiber and its tributaries. Even the sceptical Tacitus is not sure whether this argument did not have some influence on the final decision to abandon the project. However, their own wording ('faith of their fathers'), the lack of such arguments by the other deputations, as well as Tacitus condemnation of such beliefs as 'superstition' underlines that the worship of river deities surely existed, but was perhaps not held in the same high regard by everyone. The quasi-anthropomorphic terms in which the Tiber is described are not necessarily a sign of the Tiber being considered a deity, as will be explored in further detail in the next chapter. In this case, the Reatines seem to be more concerned with matters of prestige. Rome, as the *caput mundi*, deserved a fittingly majestic river, one capable of standing up to that other great river of the empire: the Nile.

Where the other major rivers of the empire only receive scant attention, the Nile provides us with an overwhelming amount of evidence for cultic worship. Egypt was dependant on the Nile for its agriculture and fully aware of that fact. The river had been worshipped since pharaonic times as the god Hapi, a tradition which according to Bonneau continued in the guise of the Greco-Roman Nile god.[122] Numerous Greco-Roman literary sources, as well as epigraphic evidence from Egypt, testify that the river itself was honoured with religious rites, sacrifices and a festival by the Egyptian population until the end of antiquity.[123] What is not always clear, especially in Greco-Roman sources, is who these sacrifices were dedicated to. Next to a Nile deity, Sarapis-Osiris and Isis were considered responsible for the yearly flooding, as well as the emperor and the Egyptian gods in general. It is quite possible that all of the above were considered to simultaneously play their role in the coming of the flood. Either way, the god(s) considered responsible for the flooding of the river had to be appeased with proper rites, performed by special Nile priests.[124] The exact nature of Nilotic worship, and whether or not any sanctuaries and/or cult statuary was involved is a different matter altogether. The nature of the rites and the festivities varied considerably from place to place and

[121] Tacitus, *Annales,* 1.79.

[122] Boneau (1964) 362.

[123] For a full list of literary testimonia, see Bonneau (1964) 361, n. 1-10.

[124] Though the exact nature and activities of the Nile clergy is highly uncertain due to a general lack of detailed sources, see Bonneau (1964) 382-393.

from period to period. For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to note that the festivities were connected with more than just the Nile deity, but also featured gods with strong connections to fertility and Nile water, such as Sarapis-Osiris, or Khnum; they were also enormously popular with the Egyptian population.[125] More importantly still, the Roman prefects of Egypt took active part in the yearly festivities in name of their emperor to ensure the Nile flood.[126] Via this route, Roman river god imagery made its way to the deep south of Egypt. In the Khnum temple at Elephantine, a monumental stairway was constructed in the second century A.D., to provide access to the Nile during the festivities. What is interesting about this stairway is that it is decorated with a relief of the Nile god in Roman style, unique among the other, fully Egyptian artworks in the temple.[127] The importance which was attached to the Nile rites is perhaps best illustrated by attempts of Christian leaders to have the yearly sacrifices banned during the 4th century. The Nile cult remained one of the more resilient features of Egyptian paganism which, together with the mysterious and unexplained nature of the river's flood and the importance it had to economy of Egypt and the empire, made the Nile cult something of a *cause célèbre* between pagans and Christians.[128] Libanius, in an oration to emperor Theodosius, represents the crux of the pagan argument. He is absolutely convinced of the necessity of the Nile worship, mostly out of fear for the dire consequences a failed flood would have for both Egypt and the empire.[129]

### 2.3 – *Holy waters, sacred floods*

River deities received cult, that much is clear even from the rather limited set of sources that have come down to us. They were honoured with altars, sacrifices, votive gifts, festivities and sometimes even permanent sanctuaries. But next to the anthropomorphic Tiberinus to which Aeneas gave sacrifice, Virgil also gave us a Tiber deity conceived us as a *genius loci*, a god at one with the river he was supposed to preside over. Virgil was certainly not the only one to conceive of rivers this way. Retaining my focus on the major rivers of the empire, we will revisit the Tiber and the Nile to discover that both had important (semi-)religious qualities, related to other cults and gods, which go beyond the direct worship of a specific river deity. Both rivers functioned as a communicator between the world of men and that of the gods, much like they functioned as the quickest and easiest mode of transport and communication between mortals. Rivers were, on some occasions at least, suffused with divine power. Of course I do not wish to suggest that, for example, the veneration of the emperor as the Nile flood is completely disconnected from the worship of a Nile deity. Rather, both are different, but intimately connected, aspects of the Roman reception of rivers.

#### 2.3.1 – *The Tiber*

When discussing the actual cult of the Tiber, there was one tantalizing clue which I did not discuss. While constructing the modern embankments of the Tiber, numerous deposits of terracotta votive offerings were found alongside the banks of the river, which seem to have been stored there in

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[125] Bonneau (1964) 363-364, for an extensive description of the Nile rites see Bonneau (1964) 361-420.
[126] Hölb (2004) 32-33.
[127] Hölb (2003) 36-37.
[128] Hermann (1959) 34-38.
[129] Libanius, *Orationes,* 30.35.

"votive pits" purposefully.[130] Dating is difficult: the finds could range from the Hellenistic to the imperial period, with different pits being filled at different times.[131] The terracotta's represent a varied ensemble of miniature body-parts, cups and small statuettes of individuals or families; there seems to have been something of a preference for feet. Though their exact place of origin is hard to pinpoint due to spotty 19th-century archaeological reports and considerable theft and misplacement, it seems that around 480 terracotta's were found in deposits around the Tiber-Island, while a remaining 743 were found in various pits alongside the river.[132] Le Gall saw in this proof for a wide-spread and popular healing cult connected to the Tiber, while Pensabene and Guarducci disagree.[133] As we saw above, if there was a popular Tiber healing cult in Rome, it left remarkably few traces. This cannot be blamed on a lack of means among his followers to dedicate inscriptions or altars to him. A god like Silvanus for example, popular among the poor of the city, left us with a very large corpus of inscriptions.[134] There is furthermore no literary evidence for Tiberinus ever being worshipped as a healing god.

The votive offerings were found near a number of Hercules temples alongside the river bank. Some of the terracotta's bear inscriptions dedicating them to Hercules. The large cache found near the Tiber island can of course be connected to the temple to Asclepius located there.[135] Because most terracotta's lack inscriptions, the precise function of the votive offerings remains unclear, but dedication to Tiberinus seems unlikely. Next to sickness and healing, possible motives for donating could include fertility and parenthood, success in politics or court cases or the safe return from long journeys, to name but a few.[136] The fact that these terracotta's were buried alongside the riverbed however remains intriguing. The explanation should be sought in the waters of the Tiber river. Running water was considered to have a cleansing function since early Republican times. Auspices had to be taken each time a priest or politician on official business crossed one of the Tiber's tributary streams or the waters of a sacred spring; a custom which, for practical reasons, fell into disuse as Rome grew and incorporated more and more streams into its boundaries.[137] Yet the ability of running water to cleanse and purify survived well into imperial times and is well attested in numerous sources. To name a few examples: Venus asks the Numicus to cleanse Aeneas' body before he can ascend to godhood, running water negates the effects of magic in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* while Juvenal pours scorn on a woman for "baptizing" her moral pollution away in the Tiber.[138] Water from springs, streams or rivers was a necessary ingredient in a variety of religious rituals, for example in purification or dedication rituals. For example, during the dedication ceremony of the newly restored Capitol under Vespasianus, 'the Vestals, accompanied by boys and girls whose fathers and

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[130] Pensabene (1980) 5-8.
[131] Pensabene (1980) 43-45.
[132] Pensabene (1980) 8-15, with a map in figure 1.
[133] Le Gall (1953) 71, Pensabene (1980) 19.
[134] See Dorcey (1992).
[135] Pensabene (1980) 16-21.
[136] Pensabene (1980) 25-31.
[137] Holland (1961) 18.
[138] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14.320; Apuleius *Metamorphoses,* 1.13, 1.19; Juvenal, *Satires* VI, 522-524. Taking into account the relationship between river water and purity/divinity might also shed some light on Antinoös' unfortunate plunge into the Nile, both as a motivation as well as a reason for his rapid apotheosis.

mothers were living, sprinkled the area with water drawn from fountains and streams'.[139] As such, the waters of the Tiber river could function as a suitable place for the storing the "religiously charged" artefacts once a sanctuary reached its limit. Rivers and streams cleansed. Profaning such sacred waters was considered an abhorrent deed: '[Nero] had entered and swum in the sources of the stream which Quintus Marcius conveyed to Rome [i.e. the Aqua Marcia]; and it was considered that by bathing there he had profaned the sacred waters and the holiness of the site. The divine anger was confirmed by a grave illness which followed.'[140]

Running water could also function as a medium of communication between the world of mortals and the world of the divine. Though they are located in very different parts of the Mediterranean, the Tiber and the Nile have one thing in common: their flooding. Both recur in regular patterns, but where the flooding of the Nile was a highly anticipated event, the Tiber floods brought with them devastation. Rome is located directly in the Tiber's floodplain, on one of the most flood-prone sections of the entire river.[141] The Tiber floods have perhaps not always received the attention they deserved as part of "daily life" in Rome. Using data from several periods in Rome's history as well as modern hydrological calculations, Aldrete has suggested that imperial Rome suffered from minor flooding every 4-5 years, while exceptionally high flood occurred with an average frequency of once every 20 years.[142] Such an exceptional flood rose high enough to overwhelm almost the entire city including both monuments and residential districts whilst turning the Palatine and Capitoline hills into islands. On average than, an inhabitant of Rome might have experienced at least two major floods in his lifetime, as well as multiple smaller ones, a basic fact of life in the city until the construction of the Tiber embankments in late 19th and early 20th century.[143] Both the immediate and the delayed effects of such frequent flooding were, potentially, devastating.[144] Tacitus notes as much in his description of the flood of 15 A.D.: 'In the same year, the Tiber, rising under the incessant rains, had flooded the lower levels of the city, and its subsidence was attended by much destruction of

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[139] Tacitus, *Historiae,* 4.53.

[140] Tacitus *Annales* 14.22. Plutarch notes that the Aqua Marcia carried the best water in the city (*Vita Coriolanus,* 1), while Strabo mentions that it had 'the highest repute as compared with the other waters' (*Geographica,* 5.3.13), making Nero's bathing trip even more insulting. See also Pliny the Younger on the Clitumnus: 'over which a bridge is built that separates the sacred part from that which lies open to common use. Vessels are allowed to come above this bridge, but no person is permitted to swim except below it.', *Ep*. 8.8.

[141] Aldrete (2007) 54-55. The flood-proneness of the Tiber at the actual site of the city was in fact acknowledged by the ancient themselves it seems: see Pliny the Elder, *Naturales Historia,* 3.55.

[142] Aldrete (2007) 81.

[143] Although this safety has come at a price: the city has been more or less divorced from its river by the steep, near vertical embankment walls, which provide little access to the waters at their base. For more on the modern embankments, see Aldrete (2007) 247-252.

[144] High death tolls were relatively rare, since the hilly landscape of Rome works in favour of its populace, yet the floodwaters themselves, icy cold and filled with debris, would certainly have claimed their fair share of victims. Even more profound were the material effects, first and foremost the loss of property. The notoriously shoddy quality of both building materials and construction plans of Rome's many *insulae* would have posed a danger of their own and collapsed buildings were most likely the most noticeable result of a flood (the high quality of imperial monuments, both in material used and sound construction plans, would have made these buildings far better able to withstand floods than *insulae* and other private residences). Aldrete (2007) 102-118.

buildings and life.'[145] Add to this the streets and buildings filled with debris, mud, water, corpses, filth and rats from the backed-up sewers which all had to be cleared when the waters subsided, as well as the general disruption of public life all this entailed, and the immediate effects alone of one of the Tiber's exceptional floods would have been a serious challenge even to modern Rome. Delayed effects included more collapsing buildings, diseases as well as severe material losses and emotional damage among the poorer residents of the city.[146]

Given the destructive impact a large flood had on the city, it is not surprising that the Tiber floods were often interpreted as a sign of divine anger. Perhaps the flood of 15 AD was of just such a catastrophic nature for Asinius Gallus to move for a reference to the Sibylline Books, which were only consulted when the relationship between the human and the divine world was disturbed and needed mending. [147] Cassius Dio notes of the flood of 15 A.D. that 'most people regarded this, also, as an omen, like the violent earthquakes which shook down a portion of the city's wall (…)'.[148] Tiberius objected to the consulting of the Sibylline Books in 15 A.D., 'preferring secrecy as on earth so in heaven'[149], or as Cassius Dio puts it, 'thinking it was due to the great overabundance of surface water'.[150] Tacitus is equally specific for the flood of 69 A.D. This flood was the 'chief anxiety' of a whole host of divine omens sent to the Roman people. This flood swept away the Rome's oldest bridge, the Pons Sublicius, and caused greater devastation than usual. When the flood, in receding, left debris on the road over which general Otho was to lead his troops out of the city, this 'was interpreted as an omen of imminent catastrophe rather than as the result of chance or natural causes.'[151]
Sometimes the floods had positive religious connotations. As Pliny puts it: 'the Tiber is looked upon as a prophet of warning, its rise being always construed as a call to religion rather than as a threat of disaster.'[152] When the Tiber overflowed in 27 B.C., 'the soothsayers prophesied that he [Augustus] would rise to great heights, and hold the whole world under his sway'. Such positive accounts of the flooding of the Tiber are rare, but not without explanation. For Pliny, who describes Italy as 'the nursling and the mother of all other lands'[153], there is simply no room for troublesome floods with devastating results or portents of divine anger. Augustus and Tiberius, both still in the early years of their reign, were equally unlikely to promote a negative interpretation of the sudden flooding of the Tiber as this could be construed as a sign of divine displeasure with the status quo. Like Tiberius, not every Roman took watery omens seriously. A receding Rhine was considered a bad omen by those

[145] Tacitus, *Annales,* 1.76, for a more extensive description of the devastation a flood could cause, see Tacitus, *Historiae*, 1.86.
[146] Aldrete (2007) 141-159.
[147] Tacitus, *Annales,* 1.76, the oracles were also consulted after the flood of 54 B.C., see Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 39.61.4.
[148] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 57.14.7-8.
[149] Tacitus, *Annales,* 1.76.
[150] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 57.14.7-8.
[151] Tacitus, *Historiae,* 1.86.
[152] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia,* 3.55.
[153] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia,* 3.39.

along the Rhine frontier, whom Tacitus promptly dismisses as 'ignorant'; similar to his condemnation of river god worship as superstition.[154]

It is clear that the flooding of the Tiber was on numerous occasions seen as a divine portent of some importance. The most interesting thing about these floods, is that 'Father Tiberinus' is never mentioned in connection with them. Neither do we hear of any attempts to appease Tiberinus after devastating floods, a lack of attention further corroborated by the very meagre archaeological finds connected to his cult. Part of the explanation might be the recurring (and therefore inevitable) nature of the floods, but another lies in the interpretation of the Tiber floods as a way for any and all gods to make their displeasure known. Cassius Dio articulates the problem when he writes about the flood of 54 B.C.: 'Meantime the Tiber, either because excessive rains had occurred somewhere up the stream above the city, or because a violent wind from the sea had driven back its outgoing tide, or still more probably, as was surmised, by the act of *some divinity*, suddenly rose so high as to inundate all the lower levels in the city and to overwhelm many even of the higher portions.'[155]

### 2.3.2 – *The Nile*

Like the Tiber, the Nile's floods were considered to be a means of communication between (Egyptian) gods and mortals. Unlike the Tiber, it was the lack of floods which was considered a bad omen. Long before the Roman Empire, pharaohs had been held responsible for ensuring the Nile flood by bringing sacrifice to the gods. A good ruler meant a good flood, and when the flood failed this was seen as a sign of divine displeasure with the status quo. Seneca mentions that 'it is well-established that in the reign of Cleopatra the Nile did not flood for two successive years, the tenth and eleventh of her reign. They say that this was a sign of the loss of power for the two rulers of he world (…).'[156] Pharaonic practices were continued by the Ptolemaic dynasty and later by the Roman emperors. When Octavian for example set foot in Egypt, the Nile welcomed him with gift-laden arms, and that year saw an exceptional flood.[157] What is new, however, is that the Roman emperor is equated with the Nile flood itself and identified with the gods responsible for the Nile flood, most notably Sarapis-Osiris. Where one Greek epigram urges Augustus to bring yearly prosperity to Egypt, the priests of Philae hail his successor Tiberius directly (if symbolically) as 'Nile flood of Egypt'.[158] In the year 56/57 A.D. Nero is depicted together with the Agathos Daimon, the guardian deity of Alexandria, on Alexandrian coinage; a god closely connected to the Nile and its flood.[159]

Supporters of the Flavian dynasty in Egypt took this largely symbolic connection between emperor and Nile a step further. Cassius Dio mentions an exceptional Nile flood in the year Vespasian took the throne: a sure sign that the gods of Egypt welcomed the new dynasty with open arms.[160] The only other time this had happened, according to Dio, was when Octavian had entered Egypt after the

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[154] Tacitus, *Historiae*, 4.26. A receding river is of course the opposite of a flood, but only underlines a more general point: abnormal behaviour in rivers was a common way for the gods to make their displeasure known.
[155] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 39.61.1-2, my emphasis.
[156] Seneca, *Naturales Queastiones*, 4A.2.16.
[157] Supp. Hell. 982, 9 cited in Pfeiffer (2010) 59.
[158] Both cited in Pfeiffer (2010) 93.
[159] Pfeiffer (2010) 93-94, 97-98.
[160] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 65.8.1.

defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra (as mentioned above); a unique and powerful way for Vespasian to equate himself with the first emperor and his dynasty. In Philostratos' *Vita Appolonii*, Vespasian (as general) proclaimed to the Alexandrians to 'draw on me as you do on the Nile', as a result of which 'Egypt recovered, after oppression had now driven it to despair'.[161] Given the above flood as well as the notable Nile statue the emperor had placed in his Temple of Peace, this invention of Philostratos might have found some reflection in actual imperial propaganda.

Building on their father's legacy, Titus and Domitian are mentioned in ever more intimate connection to the river. Titus is depicted on a temple relief in Deir el-Hagar as offering a hieroglyph representing the Nile flood to the gods, thereby shares responsibility for the Nile flood on equal footing with the gods.[162] The connection is taken even further under Domitian. In a temple to the god Khnum in Syene (modern-day Aswan), built under Domitian, the emperor is venerated 'in his name as the great water of the two sources'; a title which equates the emperor to the Nile itself.[163] The location was of course no accident: Syene, deep in the south of Egypt, played a central role in the worship of the Nile, by virtue of its relationship with the god Khnum, as well as the fact that the coming flood was measured there first.[164] Domitian's Alexandrian coinage, mentioned in chapter one, is also illuminating in this regard. The putti which the Alexandrian minters added to their coinage for the first time only further emphasized the connection between emperor and Nile flood.

The Flavians, especially Titus and Domitian, were seen as directly responsible for the Nile flood, while the relationship again grew more symbolic with their successors. The emperor was *like* the Nile, with his policies making Egypt prosperous and fertile.[165] One curious example of this is to be found in Pliny's panegyric to Trajan. When the Nile flood failed to fertilize Egypt's fields, the people 'looked to Caesar for aid instead of to their river'.[166] Trajan send the necessary food supplies to Egypt, to the great joy of Pliny who gloats that the emperor has now taken the place of the Nile and Rome has become the breadbasket of Egypt.[167] In the panegyric, Trajan has brought Rome the final and most fundamental triumph over Egypt by becoming greater than the Nile and proving that the empire does not depend on its grain. Yet outside of the world of Pliny's panegyric, Trajan's administration in Egypt quite actively kept comparing the emperor to the Nile deity. As we have seen, the Alexandrian coinage under Trajan depicts the emperor together with the Nile in a wide new range of types. Emperors of the second and early third century also continued to share their imperial coinage with the river. Some emperors at least seem to have been aware of the adverse effect a bad flood could have over their authority in Egypt, despite Pliny's triumphant claims. This much is implied by Hadrian's visit to the country. Before Hadrian reached Egypt, the province had to deal with two disappointing floods. When the emperor finally visited, he was greeted by an outstanding flood, by now a familiar theme.[168] When the floods were once again lower than expected in the year 134/135 A.D., felt urged to lower the taxes of his Egyptian farmers, even when there was no threat of a

[161] Philostratus, *Vita Appolonii*, 5.28-29.
[162] Pfeiffer (2010) 135.
[163] Hölbl (2004) 38, text cited in Pfeiffer (2010) 135.
[164] Hölb (2004) 29-33.
[165] Pfeifer (2010) 93-94.
[166] Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 30.
[167] Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus*, 31.
[168] Pfeiffer (2010) 165-167.

famine. He also had an edict read out in the cities and towns of Egypt stressing the high flood of his previous visit as well as more generous floods to come in the near future.[169] Hadrian, with an intellectual interest in, as well as first-hand experience of, Egypt, would have been acutely aware that a succession of bad floods would gnaw away at the (religious) legitimization of his reign among his Egyptian subjects.

### 2.3.3 – *The Sarapis connection*

Why the intimate connection between emperors and Nile water, especially under the Flavians? Obviously, the Flavian emperors did not compose these temple texts themselves, but in the eyes of their promoters in Egypt this was considered a fitting and potent expression of the emperor's abilities, whereas this was apparently not the case in the second century. Part of the explanation might have to do with the cults of Sarapis and Isis. Vespasian seems to have had something of a personal relationship with the god, who showed his favour by having Vespasian heal a number of sick Alexandrians.[170] Titus visited Egypt in 71 A.D. and paid homage to the Apis bull, which was considered a living embodiment of Sarapis.[171] Domitian's relationship to the Egyptian cults has in the past been overstated[172], but it is still a notable fact that he had the Iseum on the Campus Martius, dedicated to Sarapis and Isis, rebuilt and refurbished with considerable new, authentically Egyptian additions. These included large amounts of original Egyptian statuary and an obelisk honouring the emperor as a ruler in pharaonic terms.[173]

Nile water had always played an important role in the cults of Sarapis-Osiris and Isis. Both he and Isis were believed to summon or have control over the Nile flood.[174] Hellenistic sanctuaries to both deities, as well as a single Roman one, were outfitted with water crypts which functioned as Nilometers, meant to symbolically reproduce the Nile flood and thereby demonstrate the power of both gods.[175] Yet during the 1st centuries B.C. as well as A.D., these Nilometers disappeared, to be replaced by Nile water pitchers, so-called Osiris Hydreios statues (depicting the god as a water-filled jar) and funerary inscriptions of devotees of the cult petitioning Osiris to give them 'cool water' in the afterlife.[176] Wild sees in this a striking Egyptianization of the cults of Sarapis and Isis throughout the empire and notes a marked increase in devotion starting in the first century A.D. Behind these new cultic items, according to Wild, may lie a newly adopted, Egyptian attitude towards natural phenomena among devotees of the cult. Instead of Sarapis and Isis impelling the Nile to overflow, as is generally the Greek way of seeing the gods, both deities are now seen as immanent within the water. The Nile water, whether the actual river or symbolically present in one of the Nile water

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[169] Cited in Pfeiffer (2010) 165-166, Bonneau (1964) 350-351.

[170] Tacitus, *Historiae*, 4.81; Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 65.8.1-7; Suetonius, *Vespasianus*, 7.2-3.

[171] Suetonius, *Titus*, 5.2.

[172] Pfeiffer (2010) 130-135 is critical of the notion that Domitian was inspired by the Egyptian kingship or paid an excessive amount of attention to Egyptian cults, though noting the remarkable emphasis on the relation between emperor and Nile water during the Flavian period.

[173] Lembke (1994) 69-70.

[174] Wild (1981) 68.

[175] Wild (1981) 9-70.

[176] Wild (1981) 101-128.

pitchers or Osiris Hydreios statues, might have been seen as a visible representation of Sarapis-Osiris on earth. [177]

If Wild is right, and his case admittedly rests on a substantial doses of conjecture, it would mean that there was a renewed, religiously inspired interest in Nile water at the same time that the Flavian emperors were equaled to the Nile flood or had themselves depicting with the Nile deity. Whether or not the Flavians were aware of such a shift in ideology within the cult of Sarapis-Osiris is another matter altogether. Vespasian's time in Egypt, including his blessing by Sarapis, Titus voyage to honour the Apis bull in traditional Egyptian fashion as well as Domitian newly erected Iseum with many new Egyptian artifacts, might at least suggest both emperors took an interest in the cult. Their Egyptian representatives in any case felt that the best way to honour their emperors was to equate them with the Nile flood: fertile, prosperous and an emanation of the god Sarapis-Osiris himself. The connection between the Nile and the Egyptian cults was not just restricted to ideology. One of the unique attributes to the Nile among the artworks mentioned in chapter one, is the bushel of grain. Not all statues of the river bear this attribute, but is seems to be exclusively used in statues of the Nile. This is of course a clear reference to the Nile floods and the rich harvests of Egypt. As such, it is no surprise that a member of the bakerscollegium in Igabrum would dedicate a small statuette of the Nile deity: to a considerable extent his profession depended on the annual flooding of the river.

This highly important aspect of the Nile received a further layer of religious importance in and around the city of Rome. Seven sculptures mentioned in chapter one can be connected to sites of worship for Sarapis and Isis. The Nile and Tiber from the Iseum on the Campus Martius are the most prominent examples. The second century statue of the Tiber from Ostia was found in one of the rooms of the local Serapeum. The god might have been accompanied by a statue of the Nile. A large hole cut into the base of the statue makes it more than probable that it was part of a small fountain or water installation within the sanctuary. Two statues of the Tiber and Nile were placed at the head of the channel in the "Canopus" section of the Villa Hadriana.[178] This area was most likely meant to evoke the Alexandrian Serapeum. Whether it was an exotic dining area, or had some actual religious significance to Hadrian is not of direct importance here. What is noteworthy, is that in the evocation of a (or rather, the) Serapeum statues of river deities were considered paramount. Lastly there are the two Capitoline river deities, which were moved to the Quirinal at some time after their placement in the Esquiline nymphaeum.[179] During the Severan period, most likely under Caracalla, a large Serapeum was built on the site, again directly inspired by the Alexandrian Serapeum.[180] The interpretation of the placing of the sculptures in the context of the Quirinal is contested: Lorenz situates both statues in a nymphaeum near the Serapeum, while Klementa feels they were part of the actual sanctuary.[181] Given the above connection between the cult and river deities in the above three cases, Klementa's suggestion has some merit, though there is as of yet no conclusive evidence either way.

[177] Wild (1981) 149-160.

[178] Lembke (1994) 32-33, 62-63.

[179] Lorenz (1979) 44, 52; As noted in chapter 1, they would have originally been placed in a nymphaeum on the Esquiline, yet seem to have been moved to the Quirinal on a later date.

[180] Coarelli (1982) 58-59, see also Lembke (1992) 99-100 for Caracalla's enthusiastic support of the cult of Sarapis.

[181] Lorenz (1979) 52, Klementa (1993) 16.

The appearance of the Tiber and Nile deities seems to be limited to the area in and around Rome. In no other sanctuaries to Sarapis or Isis have such statues been found, which implied that they did not have a large role to play in actual cultic activity.[182] The iconographical program of the Tiber and the Nile from the Iseum on the Campus Martius might provide an answer to other functions such sculptures might have had. Unlike the vast majority of other river god artworks, we have some notion of their placement within the Iseum. The rectangular northern enclosure seems to have been the centre of actual cultic practice within the compound and possibly figured *naoi* for Isis and Serapis. The finds from the northern section consisted of exclusively Egyptian objects transported from Africa: most are of the Late Dynastic and the Ptolemaic Period.[183] In front of this cultic section was a courtyard featuring Domitian's obelisk, as well as a possible fountain or small round temple. It is adjacent to this, in the southern exedra that our statues would have stood, within a larger, semi-circular water basin. They were joined there at a later date by two statues of Oceanus, variously dated to the Antonine or the Severan era.[184] In the three niches behind them stood Hellenistic statues of Sarapis, Isis and Anubis or Harpokrates – a fourth and later addition being a sculpture of Antinoös placed in a newly created niche.[185] The river deities were conspicuously placed in a large bassin in the exedra, possibly connected to some sort of fountain installation.[186] Lembke insists that cultic activity was located in the northern section of the sanctuary and that the exedra functioned as an area of leisure and *otium*; a place to admire Hellenistic Egyptian artworks within a typically Roman setting.[187] Yet a number of altars found underneath the St. Stefano, above the exedra, imply that the area was a site of active cultic worship of the aforementioned deities.[188]

The Nile holds a bushel of grain and a cornucopia, while the 16 putti refer to the Nile flood. The Tiber also holds a cornucopia with a rudder in his arms. The she-wolf with twin on which he leans once again underlines his historic and mythological importance to the city of Rome. Both sculptures were each outfitted with a frieze, running along the base of the sculpture, which further enhances this theme. These friezes are a highly unusual element in Roman river god art, and few other river god sculptures have this form of decoration. Evidently, the message on the frieze was to draw the viewers' attention. The base of the Nile is decorated with a conventional Nilotic scene: pygmies, crocodiles, hippopotami and a multitude of exotic plant- and birdlife. The impression is one of an

[182] It occurred to me that if these statues came equipped with some kind of fountain installation, the running water might be construed as being a representation of sacred Nile water, in line with the renewed importance of water for the cult as suggested by Wild. However, we would expect to see a far greater number of both rivers deities, or at the very least only the Nile, placed within Sarapis sanctuaries.

[183] Lembke (1994) 29.

[184] The dating of both statues is once again unclear. Klementa feels one statue might be of the same late Hadrianic date as the Tiber and Nile, while the other was specifically created as a pendant in the Antonine period, see Klementa (1993) 75-78. I agree with Lembke, who argues the differences in style, composition and size are too large for all four of the statues to date to the same period, let alone to have been conceived as a single project. She dates both sculptures to the Severan renovation of the Iseum, in 200-208 A.D. See Lembke (1994) 217-219.

[185] Lembke (1994) 18.

[186] Both the Tiber and the Nile show water damage, but it is unclear whether this dates to the Roman era, or the early modern period. See Klementa (1993) 24, 55.

[187] Lembke (1994) 136.

[188] As noted by Lembke herself: see Lembke (1994) 18.

almost unrestrained fertility and plenty. The sculptor(s) of the Tiber had no ready format of river scenes set within an Italian landscape and used several themes connected with the Tiber to create an Italian equivalent to the Nilotic landscape. At the Tiber's feet a mythological scene appears with a number of buildings, two river deities, two seated figures and a sow. Opinions differ on the exact interpretation of the scene.[189] What is beyond doubt, however, is that the ancient past of Rome is evoked here – the sow depicted on the relief is almost certainly a reference to the same portent that was described in Virgil at the beginning of this chapter – with special attention paid to the mythology surrounding Aeneas. As with the she-wolf, this part of the frieze again stresses the important role the river played in Roman history and mythology. The rest of the Tiber's frieze represents the course of the river, with an emphasis on productivity and prosperity. Leaving the mythological scenes, the backside of the statue presents us with a river landscape very different from that of the Nile. Three ships laden with goods are represented: the first being hauled upstream by a group of men, having just left Ostia or Portus; the second sailing on its own; the third at its destination – most likely Rome – where its contents is being unpacked. The third and final panel, below the head of Tiberinus, shows grazing cattle in a pastoral setting: Umbria, source of the Tiber and well-known for its husbandry.[190]

Both the statues and their friezes are of course general references to the fertility, prosperity and wealth both rivers bring to their region. Yet in this setting, they also specifically refer to Egypt's role as breadbasket of the empire. The importance of Egyptian grain to feed both the province(s) and the capital on a regular basis has long since been recognized. Equally well recognized is the importance the emperors attached to the grain supply, which was essential to keep the population of Rome happy as well as to keep the granaries stocked to safeguard the food-supply. As described above, the fertile flood which made these large and essential grain harvests possible were considered, among others, a blessing from Sarapis and Isis. In this light both sculptures refer directly to the grain supply, one (the Nile) as producer, the other (the Tiber) as transporter; both working in tandem to bring prosperity to the empire.[191] The references to Rome's foundational myth furthermore underlines the perceived importance of the river as equal to the grain-supplying Nile, while their placement in direct sight of colossal statues of Sarapis and Isis stresses the prosperity both gods have bestowed upon these two rivers and the people who live along them. Lastly, placing the Tiber opposite to the Nile might suggest that Sarapis and Isis have now found a new, second home along the banks of the Tiber. This emphasis on trade and prosperity is further corroborated by the two Oceanus statues, which probably stood in the same basin.[192] One carries a rudder, symbol of trade and navigability; the other carries a cornucopia; both are again of special significance when we consider the grain supply to Rome, which of course had to be transported across Oceanus' domain. The other statues found in or near other Serapea have a far less developed iconographical scheme, yet tap into the same

[189] Fröhner saw the city as Alba Longa, the gods as the Portus Augusti and the Portus Trajani and the seated figures as fishermen. Le Clarac, supported by Le Gall, upholds a different reading: the water gods are Tiberinus and the Numicus, the seated figure king Latinus. Lastly, Carcopino suggested that what is depicted here is the actual Trojan arrival in Latium, straight of the pages of Virgil, though in a heavily schematized fashion. For further discussion of the frieze, see Carcopino (1919) 708-716, for Le Gall, citing Fröhner and Le Clarac, see (1953) 3-22.

[190] Le Gall (1953) 19-20.

[191] An idea further reflected in the bronze coinage minted in Alexandria under Antoninus Pius, showing the Tiber and Nile shaking hands. See chapter 1.

[192] See n.184, above.

general symbolic meaning: prosperity, in the form of the grain trade, facilitated by the Nile and the Tiber, and bestowed upon the empire by Sarapis as the inducer of the Nile flood. The unique importance of Egyptian grain for the city of Rome and its leaders might also explain why the only other examples of the connection between Nile, Tiber and Sarapis were found in an imperial villa, Rome's main harbour and an imperially sponsored Serapeum.

### 2.4 – *Sacred art?*

The statues of the Nile and Tiber bring us back to the question at the onset of this chapter: did Roman religious tradition affect the sudden rise of river god imagery? The answer is ambivalent. Few, if any, of the sculptures and artworks were found in a cultic context. Only Pliny's description of the Clitumnus statue can be placed at an actual sanctuary as an object of worship. Several statues of the Tiber and Nile played a symbolic role within a number of Serapea, but not of any direct cultic significance. The direct religious significance of our artistic works is therefore very limited, as is the religious significance of river deities in general.

The importance of rivers, but not of river deities, also gives us some clues to the interpretation of the images presented in chapter one. These river deities function as personifications, but as personification they are not devoid of religious meaning. Perhaps we should take the idea of personifications more literally. After all, to personify something is to give it a human form and human qualities, even if only indirectly. The long history of river god worship as well as their (highly anthropomorphic) role in popular mythology would have sensitized a Roman audience to a more "human" interpretation of their rivers. After all, the Tiber god was at the very heart of Roman (mythological) history, with intimate connections to both Aeneas as well as the actual founding of Rome. The Nile flood, made possible by a Nile deity, Sarapis, or both was at the heart of its granaries and a symbol of prosperity. The people of Rome saw the Tiber floods as a sign of divine displeasure, a belief even emperors had to take into account. The religious legitimization of Roman rule over Egypt meanwhile, was partially founded on generous Nile floods and a number of emperors, including the Flavians and Hadrian, seem to have been aware of this. It seems to me highly unlikely that many Romans made clear distinctions between their religious notions of rivers on the one hand, and "secular" or "decorative" river personifications in their squares, gardens and baths on the other.

Of course, this is not to say that there were no possible distinctions between the two at all. The religious reception of rivers should not be overstated: there were competing, "scientific" explanations for the errant behaviour of rivers, at least amongst the Roman elite. Tacitus in particular proved himself sceptical of watery portents and river deities on a number of occasions. The question of what the very nature of a river is – a divine entity in itself, a link between the world of the gods and that of men, or "just" a waterway functioning without any divine intervention – was never conclusively answered in the ancient worldview, especially in the case of such a mysterious river as the Nile. Cassius Dio's comment on the causes of the flood of 54 B.C. is enlightening in this respect: divine anger, excessive rains or troublesome winds were all equally distinct possibilities to the author. Such an ambivalent way of looking at rivers would have naturally influenced the creation and especially the reception of river god imagery. It also however seeped into other aspects of Roman thinking and writing on rivers, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3 – Human geography

Though charged with varying degrees of religious importance, river god art can't be explained by religious reverence alone. After all, cults of river deities stretch back to Classical Greece. Nor does there seem to be a sudden religious devotion dedicated to river deities during the Roman Empire, important thought their waters might have been considered to be. For a further explanation of the rise and prominence of river god art under the empire, I turn to the more worldly aspect of rivers. They are of course also features in a landscape, visible to the human eye and traceable on a map. Yet it is exactly in the Roman geographical treatment of rivers that we find considerable reflection of the individualistic, almost human-like qualities of rivers visible in the previous chapter.

Yet before we delve into matter geographic, it is important to note that Roman geographical thinking was quite different from that of the modern world; not just in the way maps were used or made, but rather in the way space was conceived and recorded. As Nicholas Purcell has noted, Roman map-literacy was scanty at best. 'It is hard for us to conceive of ancient geographical ignorance, which is a wholly different ignorance from that expressed by the words terra incognita on the maps of the late medieval and early modern world.'[193] We can't assume that the Roman perception of space was the same, or even similar, to ours. Roman geographers for example, were not familiar with such handy geographical constructs as 'the Iberian Peninsula' or 'the North German Plain'. Even familiar sounding concepts such as 'Italy' should not be equated by our own environmental or geographical understanding of the Italian Peninsula.[194] The Roman world certainly did not lack maps. Some, like the monumental map of Agrippa in the Porticus Vipsania, were even given great prominence in the public space. Yet they seem to have been rare and where they were produced they might not heed to our modern idea of what a map should entail. This relative lack of maps and map-literacy allowed for a whole range of different conceptualizations of space. A number of these ways of conceptualizing geographical space sprang from practical experience; dividing regions by climate, for example, or conceptualizing the lay of the land as if standing from a high place and looking down on the region. More abstract theories about the shape of the world came from classical Greece, where a number of scholars had promulgated the notion of a world with a geometric layout.[195] In all cases, rivers had the potential to develop a uniquely important role.

It is within this general framework of geographical thinking that Pliny the Elder wrote his encyclopaedic *Natural History*, which purports to contain all human knowledge about the natural world. Murphy has recently made a convincing case for seeing the *Natural History* as a uniquely Roman document, filled to the brim with cultural reflections on a vast range of topics, thereby giving us a unique insight into the Roman worldview at the height of the Roman Empire.[196] Books 3 to 6 of the *Natural History* focus solely on a geographical oversight of the known world. In gazetteer-like fashion, Pliny guides us from Spain in the west to India in the east. As such, it is of great importance in discovering Roman attitudes towards geography, space and landscape. Yet there are other reasons why the *Natural History* is of importance to this research. The first is the author of the work. Pliny

[193] Purcell (1990) 8.

[194] Purcell (1990) 9.

[195] Purcell (1990) 9-10.

[196] See especially Murphy (2004) 1-25.

has something of a reputation for being an armchair scholar, content with relying on literary sources instead of critical research. Yet in the field of geography at least, he had considerable personal experience. Pliny spent most of his professional life in service to the Roman state. He served as military commander, procurator, prefect and personal advisor to Vespasian.[197] In all these capacities, (accurate) geographical knowledge was of the utmost importance. As a commander in the field, Pliny would have had first-hand experience with gaining and using such knowledge. As a high ranking official within the Roman administrative machine, as well as a scholar, Pliny would also have been acutely aware of the means to read, transcribe and transmit geographical facts. Secondly, the dating of the *Natural History* is of considerable interest. Pliny's work was dedicated to and published under Titus. The role rivers play within Pliny's geography could therefore also shed light on the rise of river god imagery and the role rivers played within Roman geography and culture in the late first century A.D.

Even a cursory glance at the geographical books makes clear that rivers do indeed play a considerable role in Pliny's ordering of the world. Water functions as one of the most important organizing principles in Books 3-6. The totality of the geographical books is structured as a *periplus*, a coastal itinerary. The world is seen and travelled from west to east, following coastlines, and foraying inland along rivers, lakes or bays. It was an ancient tradition and one popular with Greek and Roman geographers alike.[198] In the words of Murphy, '[c]oasts and rivers are the bones of the *Natural History*'s narrative, the skeleton on which are hung the names of city and tribe.'[199] This might seem straightforward and convenient enough: rivers are easily recognizable landmarks. Yet forests, islands, valleys and other notable geographical features never receive such persistent attention from Pliny. Furthermore, a detailed analysis of these books show that Pliny conceptualizes rivers in a number of distinct ways, which not only betray the importance of rivers to the author and his world, but also to a considerable extent tie in with the themes explored in the previous chapter, especially that of personification and the individuality of rivers. To give a more unified interpretation of Pliny's use of rivers, I turn to his description of the (modern-day) territory of the Iberian Peninsula, though with regular excursion to other parts of the geographical books to highlight a number of exceptional rivers.

### 3.1 - *The river as boundary*

The first impression of a river is usually that of a line within a landscape, a convenient boundary to separate regions. In the *Natural History*, they separate not only regions, but whole continents. Pliny notes that for the continents, 'the boundaries are the river Don and the river Nile', dividing the world in three equal parts.[200] Such neat divisions echo Greek theories of a geometrical world plan, which finds further reflection in Pliny's assertion that the world could, according to most authorities and with good reason, also be divided 'into two portions by a line drawn from the river Don to the Straits of Gibraltar.'[201] On a smaller scale, rivers also bound and separate territories. They are particularly handy as administrative divisions: Baeturia for example is bounded by the Guadalquivir and the

[197] Syme (1969).
[198] Sallman (1971) 232-236.
[199] Murphy (2004) 136.
[200] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.3.
[201] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.5.

Guadiana.[202] The area of Hispania Ulterior consisted of two provinces, 'Lusitania extending along the north side of Baetica and separated from it by the river Anas.'[203] Baetica in its turn is 'named after the river Baetis which divides it in two'.[204] Just like landscapes, social groups can be divided by rivers as well. Pliny's first introduction to, and main scheme of, Gaul is noteworthy:

'The whole of Gaul included under the name of Long-haired divides into three races of people, which are chiefly separated by rivers: from the Sheldt to the Seine is Belgic Gaul, from the seine to the Garonne Celtic Gaul, also called Lyonese, and from the Garonne to the projection of the Pyrenees Aquitanian Gaul, previously called Armorica'[205]

Rivers not only divide, but form the bounds of regions, much in the same way as the world is believed to be bounded by the ocean. '[O]n the ocean coast beginning at the river Guadiana, the town Ossonoba, surnamed Aestuaria (…)', 'between this river [the Guadalquivir] and the ocean coast, the most famous places inland are (…)', 'the region stretching from the Guadalquivir to the river Guadiana beyond the places already mentioned is called Baeturia (…)'.[206] River cut through all types of geographical knowledge (based on social, territorial, administrative criteria) as an effective way to divide, as expected considering their visual impact on a landscape or map, as well as their practical impact on transportation.

Strangely enough, one of the most obvious cases of rivers as boundaries is not mentioned or even hinted at by Pliny: the borders of the Roman Empire. The Danube, Rhine and Euphrates bounded great stretches of the empire, yet Pliny does not mention any defensive function in his description of these rivers. He is not alone in his disregard. Roman military historians have in the past almost completely denied the effectiveness of rivers as boundaries in general. Maxfield speaks for many when he notes that rivers 'may be bureaucratically convenient, providing clear lines of demarcation as long as the peoples on both sides agree to observe them, but they are lines which are difficult to enforce, they are militarily weak'.[207] Though this is absolutely true for the modern world of helicopters and amphibian vehicles, to pre-industrial armies rivers *were* considerable obstacles. Even for the well-organized Roman military, let alone for less well-supplied and technologically capable military forces, rivers were difficult, even practically impossible, to cross without the help of bridges, fords or boats.[208] Not only was it difficult to swim for soldiers with a considerable amount of personal luggage – if they could swim at all – but there were also supplies to be transported from one bank to the other. It is for this reason that Roman emperors and the military command alike felt considerable anxiety over the building of bridges along the frontier rivers – though far less about building bridges

[202] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.13.
[203] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.6.
[204] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.7.
[205] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 4.105.
[206] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.7, 3.10, 3.13.
[207] Maxfield (1987) 139.
[208] In winter of course, rivers could occasionally completely freeze over. At such a time an entire army could technically cross it by simply walking over the ice. And they did, on a number of occasions (the Dacians in 30 B.C., the Iazyges in 173/174 A.D., the Suebi, the Alani and the Vandals in 406 A.D.), see Rankov (2005) 179. However, considering the timespan involved such invasions are far more rare than expected. Evidently, winter was just as hard a time to campaign for barbarian troops as it was for Roman troops.

well behind those frontiers, as will be treated in detail in chapter four. Bridges offered enemy troops, especially loosely organized raiding parties or small armies, easy access into the imperial provinces. Bridges were only constructed if prolonged military action (or pacification) was required on the opposite bank. Case in point is Trajan's great bridge over the Danube, which served to easy military and civilian traffic to the newly conquered Dacia. Hadrian, fearful of invasions, had the superstructure of the bridge removed even with two forts on either side to guard it.[209] The Roman military presence alongside the great border rivers, in the form of standing armies as well as naval patrols, would have further made sure that the enemies of Rome had no access to methods of crossing the river, either by make-shift bridges or boats.[210]

More importantly, rivers were *perceived* as effective boundaries as well. Tacitus is the most explicit when he speaks of Augustus as having fenced the empire 'by the ocean or distant rivers'.[211] Elsewhere, he states '[o]ur main strength, however, lay on the Rhine' with eight legions, as well as mentioning that four legions defended the area 'from the Syrian marches right up to the Euphrates', while and equal number 'held the bank of the Danube'.[212] Similarly, we find Seneca speaking of 'the Danube or the Rhine, one checking the attacks of Sarmatians and marking a boundary between Europe and Asia, the other keeping back the Germans, a nation eager for war.'[213] Tacitus and Seneca of course lived far away from any frontier regions, and, like Pliny, might just be using rivers as a handy or poetic organizational tool. Yet the awareness of major rivers as boundaries of the empire also finds its way into the *elogium* of Tiberius Plautius Silvanus Aelianus, who was general in Moesia in the mid 60's A.D. It states that he 'brought kings hitherto unknown or hostile to the Roman people to the bank of the river which he was guarding (*tuebatur*) to worship the Roman standards (…)'.[214] The verb used (*tueor*, to protect from armed attack) leaves no doubt to the military function of the river.

The Roman emperor as well as the military would most likely have been acutely aware of the important defensive capabilities of rivers, and the role they played in protecting the empire from outside incursions. Where present, this idea would have undoubtedly been strengthened by the religious qualities of rivers mentioned in the previous chapter. Rivers as magical boundaries, as actual gods or just as waterways infused with divine potential; all would have contributed to the mental perception of rivers as boundaries difficult to cross. If we take a closer look at the inscriptions naming the Rhine and Danube gods briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, another interesting element comes to light. The altar mentioning the Danube was dedicated by a Roman veteran, while several of the Rhine inscriptions were found near Roman forts, including Tasgetium (Eschenz) and Fectio (Utrecht).[215] They seem to have been set up by Roman soldiers or personnel working at these sites, but it is difficult to tell who exactly the persons were who had these inscriptions hewn. Possibly, these dedicators were somewhat higher-up in the local military command to afford such expenditure. What we do know for certain, is that along the frontier there were a number of Romans

[209] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 68.13.6.

[210] Rankov (2005) 180-181.

[211] Tacitus, *Annales*, 1.9.

[212] Tacitus, *Annales*, 4.5.

[213] Seneca, *Quaestiones Naturales*, 6.7.1.

[214] CIL 14.3608, translation by Rankov (2005) 177.

[215] CIL 13.5255 near Tasgetium (Eschenz); CIL 13.8810 and 8811 near Fectio (Utrecht)

(or Romanized locals) who felt that local river deities were powerful entities who needed to be appeased. With the military and religious aspects going hand in hand, a river would have indeed seemed a formidable boundary.

### 3.2 – *The river as highway*

This makes it all the stranger than Pliny, an experienced military commander himself who was even stationed near the Rhine, makes no mention of the boundaries of the empire. One reason might be that for Pliny, rivers are more about connecting than they are about separating. We already saw rivers appear as communicators between the world of the divine and that of men, an idea which found its reflection in the daily practice of the Roman Empire: water transport was in many cases the cheapest and the fastest mode of transportation. In several ways, rivers are the element which ties his geography together. Rivers are intimately connected to cities, both in the Roman world as in Pliny's narrative. 'the town of Barbesula with its river; ditto Salduba; the town of Suel; Malaga with its river, one of the treaty towns. Then comes Maenuba with its river (…)', or 'Caesaraugusta (…) is washed by the Ebro', 'the river Xenil (…) washes the colony of Astigi'.[216] On the east coast of Spain, rivers and cities follow each other almost as equals: 'the Roman towns of Badalona and Iluro, the river Arnum, Blandae, the river Alba, Amporias (…) and the river Ticer.'[217] Rivers and cities stand on par as the defining elements in this Spanish landscape.

Because they are defining elements, rivers function as an important narrative device to structure the geography itself and make the data understandable to its readers. 'At this point the Guadalquivir first becomes navigable, and there are the towns of Carbula and Detunda, the river Xenil flowing into the Guadalquivir on the same side. (…) on the left bank is the colony Hispal surnamed Romulensis, while on the opposite side are the towns Osset surnamed Julia Constantia, Vergentum or Juli Genius, Orippo, Caura, Siarum and the river Maenuba, a tributary of the Guadalquivir on its right.'[218] In Italy meanwhile 'along the Po, the richest river of Italy, the whole country is studded with famous and flourishing towns: Libarna, the colony of Dertona, Iria, Vardacas, Industria, Pollenza, Correa, surnamed Potentia, Forum Fulvi or Valenza, Augusta of the Bagienni, Alba Pompeia, Aste, Acqui.'[219] On the other side of the world, 'the tribes dwelling on the Indus – our enumeration proceeding up stream – are the Mathoæ, the Bolingæ, the Gallitalutæ, the Dimuri, the Megari, the Ardabæ, the Mesæ, Abi, Uri and Silæ (…) and crossing the Indus and following it down-stream, the Samarabriæ, the Sambraceni, the Bisambritæ, the Orsi and Adiseni, and the Taxilæ, with their famous city'.[220] Pliny here takes us on an extended journey across the world, a literary boat tour through his geography where we pass cities as if we were sailing downstream and taking them in from the deck of a ship. Literary space is constructed as an actual, physical journey.

There is room for nuance. The *Natural History* is not alone in this attention to rivers and their importance to the conceptualization of a landscape, nor this idea exclusive to the Flavian age. As Purcell has shown at length, the same principles were at work at the Roman expansion into Cisalpine Gaul in the second century B.C. When the Via Flaminia, stretching to Ariminum, was rebuilt under

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[216] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.1.8, 3.3.24, 3.1.12.

[217] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.22.

[218] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.10-11.

[219] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.49.

[220] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 6.77-78

Augustus, it was not to Placentia, but to the river Trebia that it led, giving some hint as to the importance of river routes in the region; some decades later the milestones on the Via Claudia Augusta have such telling route markers as 'from Altinum to the Danube' or 'from the Po to the Danube'.[221] Pliny also uses narrative devices other than rivers to organize and clarify the vast amount of geographical data he claims to preside over. Administrative and social divisions[222], as well as other notable geographic features[223] are used within the *Natural History*'s description of the world. Yet they never receive such persistent attention as rivers. The reason why Pliny gives such attention to rivers can be found in his detailed descriptions of the larger waterways of the empire, which display not just their (perceived) importance to human society, but also a remarkable amount of anthropomorphism in and of themselves.

### 3.3 – *Water with a personality*

The idea of a geographical treatise as a literary journey is continued in Pliny's constant mention of the navigability (*meabilis/navigabilis*) of rivers.[224] 'At this point [the city of Cordova] the Guadalquivir first becomes navigable', Pliny explicitly states.[225] Next to the Guadalquivir, there is the Maenuba ('another navigable river'[226]) and of course the river Ebro, 'rich in ship-borne trade (…) with a course of 450 miles, for 260 of which from the town of Vareia it is navigable by ships'[227]. Perhaps Pliny considered this useful practical information to share. Yet there are other reasons for mentioning, or even emphasizing, rivers navigability. Roman culture's highly anthropocentric worldview is well documented. For Roman authors, nature was positive when it was pleasurable or useful to man.[228] When rivers are mentioned in the *Natural History*, their navigability (if it is noteworthy) is one of their defining features, rather than for example their length. It is of such importance, that Pliny's text is almost apologetic when discussing the Tiber. After all, the Tiber 'owing to its rugged and uneven channel, is even so not navigable for a long distance'[229] Yet, shortly before reaching Rome, it is enhanced by the considerable number of 42 tributaries, as well as the aqueducts and springs of the city. '[C]onsequently it is navigable for vessels of whatever size from the Mediterranean and is a most tranquil trafficker in the produce of all the earth, with perhaps more villas on its banks and overlooking it than all the other rivers in the whole world. And no river is more circumscribed and shut in on either side, yet of itself it offers no resistance (…)'[230] This unruly and unusable river has, in its course, become an exemplary stream which offers no resistance to humanity: a worthy rival for the illustrious Nile.

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[221] Purcell (1990) 13, 22.

[222] See for example the earlier citations about Gaul, but see also 3.1.10 ('in the jurisdiction of Cordoba'), or the Celtici and Turduli of 3.13.

[223] See for example the obvious case of the Pyrenees as boundary between Hispanic and Gallic provinces, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.30.

[224] Murphy (2004) 137-138, Beagon (1990) 287-291.

[225] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3. 10.

[226] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3. 12.

[227] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.21.

[228] See for example Beagon (1996) 286.

[229] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3. 53.

[230] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3. 55.

The Tiber here already hints at another very important quality of rivers for Pliny: their reputation and fame (*clarus/nobilis*).[231] Whereas navigability has a rather straightforward relationship to rivers, fame is a rather more human quality. Pliny sees the most famous or noteworthy rivers as having something of a "life course". Rivers are never described as being part of a continuous hydrological cycle, but rather we (again) travel with the water from source to mouth. When the river's "life course" is over, Pliny moves to a different subject. The Nile finally reached Egypt 'somewhat fatigued by the distance it has raced, and it belches out, by many mouths it is true, into the Egyptian sea.'[232] Even when he writes about the far smaller Anas that it spreads into meres, contracts into narrows, burrows underground and 'happily' emerges again on a number of occasions[233], which might leave the impression on a modern reader of a pseudo-life form rather than an inanimate feature of the landscape. Furthermore, water is never just water: different rivers have distinctly different waters which do not always mingle. The Tigris for example, moves through Lake Aretissa, underneath Mount Taurus and still keeps its waters separate and distinct; even when mingled in flood with the waters of the Arsanias the two rivers remain separate entities.[234] When the Jordan is forced to be swallowed up by the 'poisonous' (because inhospitable to man) Dead Sea, it does so 'moving with reluctance'.[235] Some rivers even *act* like humans. The Guadalquivir for example 'is first of moderate size, but it receives many tributaries from which it takes their glory as well as their waters.'[236] When we reach the Po, the river is described in some strikingly militaristic terms:

'Concealing itself in a cavity of the earth, it rises again in the land of Forum Vibii. In fame it yields to no other river: the Greeks called it Eridanus, and the punishment of Phaeton magnified its reputation. At the rising of the Dogstar it swells with melting snow, and though it exercises violence more against the field than against shipping, the river claims no plunder for itself, lavishing fertility where it deposits its booty. To a distance of three hundred miles from its spring to it adds eighty-eight by wandering, and it not only receives navigable rivers from the Alps and Apennines, but even immense lakes that discharge into it as well. It carries to the Adriatic thirty rivers in all, the most famous of which are the following: from the Apennine side, the Iactus (…) and the Mincius. There is no river known to receive a larger increase than this in so short a space; so much so indeed that it is impelled onwards by this vast body of water, and, invading the land, forms deep channels in its course: hence it is that, although a portion of its stream is drawn off by rivers and canals between Ravenna and Altinum, for a space of 120 miles, still, at the spot where it discharges the vast body of its waters, it is said to form seven seas.'[237]

[231] Murphy (2004) 137-138.
[232] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.54
[233] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.6.
[234] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 6.127-128.
[235] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.71.
[236] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.9.
[237] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 3.117-120. Translation from the beginning of the citation to 'Mincius' is taken from Murphy (2004) 146, the latter half of the text, where Murphy ends his translation, is according to Loeb (see bibliography). I used Murphy (partial) translation because I feel his translation is in this case more true to the thrust of the narrative than the Loeb translation, which "naturalizes" Pliny's text to fit in with a more modern, strictly geographical interpretation of rivers.

It is hard not to feel some of the awe which Pliny meant to convey. We are confronted here with a river which acts like a general or tyrant; together with its tributaries, which join their leader like a water army, it scours its banks, it invades the land and it quite literally cuts it way through the landscape. Its brute force in unmatched: even with the canals it still has water enough for seven seas. Yet this is no despot. It is navigable, claims no booty for itself, lavishes fertility on the land and does not hinder trade. The Po is justly famous, as it is a model of the benevolent tyrant. It possesses immense power, but restrains that power where necessary for the good of mankind: the Po as an example of the ideal ruler. The Po is not the only fighting river. The Euphrates is perhaps the most extreme example in the *Natural History*. The river battles the Taurus mountains for supremacy:

'At Elegia it encounters Mount Taurus, which however does not bar its passage (…). The river is called the Omma where it forces its way into the range (…) although even where it forces its passage though the Taurus range it permits for a bridge. At Claudiopolis (…) for the first time in this combat Mount Taurus carries the stream out of its course, and though conquered and cleft in twain gains the victory in another matter by breaking its career and forcing it to take a southerly direction. Thus this duel of nature becomes a drawn battle, the river reaching the goal of its choice but the mountain preventing it from reaching it by the course of its choice.'[238]

The fight between the Euphrates and Taurus recalls the scenes of the amphitheatre. The one opponent tries to "outsmart" the other, yet both are equally matched much like a pair of gladiators. Beagon has already called attention to the way gladiatorial combat creeps into the whole range of Pliny's work, from the clash of elements to the duel between the snake and the elephant Nature arranges for her own amusement.[239] Taking into account the Guadalquivir, the Po and similar rivers, Pliny's worldview becomes decidedly militaristic. Not only humans, but natural elements wage war against each other and participate in duels. The more interesting conclusion in this case, is not so much that the world within the *Natural History* is (occasionally at least) one of strife and war, but the extent to which Pliny is comfortable humanizing natural features like rivers and explaining their characteristics in strikingly anthropomorphic terms. The Euphrates runs the course it does because, at different intervals, it wins and loses the battle with the Taurus mountains. That the Roman worldview is anthropocentric, is a given. The extent to which this anthropocentrism ranges has perhaps been underestimated. In these cases at least, it does not just colour Pliny's worldview (for example in the lauding of rivers for their navigability) but actually forms his method of interpretation and explanation. Again some nuance is in order. The majority of rivers are never given such intimate treatment as for example the Po or the Euphrates. They are famous rivers, noteworthy and much discussed by other authors, which might make the temptation to give them human-like attributes all the greater. That Pliny actually believed in some form of river deity within the rivers of the empire like his fellow Romans at Fectio or Ostia, is rather unlikely. In explaining the flooding of the Nile for example, Pliny makes no mention whatsoever of any divine intervention, and even the Tiber floods are only described as 'construed' as a prophet of warning and a call to religion.[240] The more important point is that even if Pliny only described his rivers in anthropomorphic terms for strictly

[238] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.84-85.
[239] Beagon (1992) 151-152.
[240] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.55-58, 3.55.

stylistic reasons, he considered this a logical, rational and efficient way of describing and explaining natural phenomena and evidently expected his readers to share this view.

### 3.4 – *The illustrious Nile*

One river which has only barely been mentioned in this chapter is the Nile. Yet the Nile, possibly the most *clarus* river of the empire, receives the most attention from Pliny and not only from him. The Nile artworks were, based on those works we can identify, by far the most numerous of all. The river held a special fascination for Roman authors as a marvel of nature and geography; it waters were considered to have extraordinary qualities while its sources remained a mystery to even the most dogged of explorers. Naturally, there is considerable overlap with the religious qualities of the river cited in the previous chapter. Yet in many cases, the god(s) watching over the Nile play no direct role at all. Rather, a large number of Greek and Roman authors shared Pliny's view that individual rivers had unique waters, each with their own benefits and characteristics. These benefits and characteristics explain to quite some extent the appeal of artworks depicting the Nile, both for emperors and a Roman audience in general.

In the *Natural History*, we once again come across some noticeable anthropomorphic terms when Pliny turns to the Nile. It 'disdains to flow through arid deserts of sand, and for a distance of several days' journey it hides underground, but afterwards it bursts out in another larger lake in the territory of the Masaesyles clan of Mauretania Caesarienses, and so to speaks makes a survey of the communities of mankind, proving its identity by having the same fauna. Sinking again to the sand of the desert it hides for another space of 20 days' journey till it reaches the nearest Ethiopians, and when it has once more become aware of man's proximity it leaps out in a fountain, probably the one called the Black Spring.'[241] There were already a number of illustrations above of the peculiar ancient idea that the great rivers ran underground for considerable parts of their course.[242] The longer and more often a river ran underground, the more mysterious, powerful and therefore famous it was supposed to be. Pliny's Nile pops in and out of the earth like a mole, though always looking for humans to benefit. The river gives birth to dense forests of trees and cleaves through islands along its course. Only at the cataracts is its raw strength and energy broken. Subdued, it softly glides towards the sea and only in this subdued state can it benefit human civilization and its agriculture. Later in the *Natural History*, Pliny even mentions the Nile 'plays the part of farmer' with its rich inundation.[243] It is of course little surprise that the inundation and the effect it had on Egyptian agriculture was of prime interest to Greco-Roman authors. The inundation, the cause of which was disputed, together with the famously unknown sources of the river, gave the Nile an air of the mystique which could not be rivalled even by Father Tiber. Perhaps Diodorus Siculus captures the general wonderment of the ancient world best when he writes that '[t]he rise of the Nile is a phenomenon which appears wonderful enough to those who have witnessed it, but to those who have only heard of it, quite incredible.'[244] As already noted in chapter two, the Egyptian adoration of the Nile was well known throughout the empire. Yet Greco-Roman authors themselves were equally gushing with praise. Because it so richly fed the fields of Egypt, the Nile water itself, regardless of the actual inundation,

[241] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.52.
[242] For a "scientific" defence of this idea, see Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, 6.8.1-2.
[243] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 18.167.
[244] Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 1.36.7.

was considered particularly potent and fertile. For one thing, Nile water was a delicacy. Seneca mentions that 'no river has a fresher taste'.[245] Aelius Aristides, writing in the second century, tells us the common belief among sailors that Nile water stayed fresher and for a longer duration than any other water.[246] Some Egyptians even bottled their Nile water as if it were wine.[247] The *Historia Augusta* likewise tells us that Egyptian have no need for wine because the waters of the Nile are so sweet.[248] Nile water was considered rich, fertile and even fattening[249], hence the corpulent depictions of the rivers in Roman art. Yet the Nile, being a divinely blessed river, also transferred this effect to those who drank of its waters. Aelian recommends it for weight gain, while Plutarch calls its waters nourishing and fattening, as well as mentioning that the Apis bull had to be kept of the Nile water, otherwise it would grow too corpulent.[250]

Yet what really surprised Roman audiences was the freakish effect the Nile had on the fertility of both its people and its landscape. The rich plant life and grotesque animals with which the river is often depicted (especially in the frieze of the Iseum Nile) were not just supposed to be semi-accurate reflections of life along the Nile, but the direct result of the Nile water. Pomponius Mela, who was Pliny's direct geographical predecessor in writing his *Chorographia*, believed the Nile to be the progenitor of crocodiles and hippopotami, while he called Egypt 'the richly fecund mother of animals'.[251] Nile water was so potent, it could be said to contain life itself. Again according to Pomponius Mela 'this phenomenon is most clearly seen when the river has ceased its flooding and has returned to its bed. In the wet fields are found animals which are not yet fully developed but are still in the process of receiving life. Their bodies are in part clearly formed but in part remain still conjoined with the earth.'[252] Pomponius was not the only one to notice this bizarre phenomenon, though opinions differed on whether these spontaneously generated creatures were common mice or exotic monsters.[253] Little wonder then that the Nile waters were perceived as having more than just a fattening effect. Aelian once again talks of the Nile waters being 'extremely progenitive', a fact which Egyptian goatherds were well aware of.[254] They made their goats drink copious quantities of Nile water, which made their goats bring forth twins and even quintuplets. It also affected Egyptian mothers, who had built up something of a reputation for fertility throughout antiquity.[255] Solinus knew the reason. Citing the extraordinary case of a Egyptian mother giving birth to seven babies he notes that it 'is not all that marvellous for Egypt since the Nile makes fruitful with its fertilizing drink

[245] Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, 4A.2.30.
[246] Aelius Aristides, *Orationes*, 36.116.
[247] Aelius Aristides, *Orationes*, 36.116.
[248] Historia Augusta, *Pescennius Niger*, 7.7.
[249] Vergilius, *Aeneid*, 9.31; Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, 4A.2.9.
[250] Plutarch, *Questiones Convivales*, 8.5.725 E, Plutarch, *De Isis et Osiris*, 5.353 A; Aelian, *De Natura Animalium*, 11.10.
[251] Pomponius Mela, *Chorographia*, 1.9.52, 1.9.49, translation according to Wild (1981) 96.
[252] Pomponius Mela, *Chorographia*, 1.9.52, translation according to Wild (1981) 96.
[253] Mice: Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 9.84.179, Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica,* 1.10.2. Monsters: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.422-37.
[254] Aelian, *De Natura Animalium,* 3.33.
[255] See for example Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 7.3.33; Strabo, *Geographica*, 15.1.22.

not only the fields of the earth but also the wombs of mankind'.[256] Seneca even mentions that according to some, Nile water was a good cure against female sterility.[257]

Though its waters might be mysterious and powerful, nothing was more mysterious than the sources of the great river. Pliny, who is otherwise quite detailed on the area in which the Nile originates, emphasizes his lack of knowledge on its source.[258] King Juba's expedition was the only one to ever come close. Lucan's *Civil War*, written no more than two decades before Pliny's *Natural History*, is enlightening in this regard. Here, the megalomaniacal and bloodthirsty Caesar would give up all his other political ambitions if only to see the springs of the Nile, a goal in which Alexander, Cambyses and pharaoh Sesostris had failed.[259] Tiberius, when still a prince, 'saw the sources of the Ister' according to Strabo, the first Roman or Greek to do so.[260] Seneca 'listened to two centurions whom Nero sent to investigate the source of the Nile (just as he is very enthusiastic about the other virtues so he is especially devoted to the truth).'[261] This persistent association between rulers and the discovery of a river's source is part of a broader connection between power and geography. Emperors (and their families) had a special and intimate relationship with acquiring geographical knowledge.[262] The late Republic and especially the early Empire saw a veritable boom in geography related imagery in relationship to power. Nicolet has written extensively on the role of such geographical imagery in the foundation of Augustan authority. Claims of world dominion pop up throughout Augustan poetry and art while Agrippa's monumental world map brought the empire into view, claim dominance and power through extensive geographical knowledge.[263] Augustus himself contributed to the whole in his *Res Gestae* where he lauds his achievements in discovering and subsequently conquering area where no Roman troops had come before.[264] As acknowledged by Strabo, geographical knowledge was intimately tied up with Roman conquest and governance.[265] By not only conquering, but also "mapping" territories (in words as in actual maps), they were symbolically claimed for Rome. If maps, in the modern sense of the word, were rare this would only strengthen their power as symbols of a higher kind knowledge and authority. The early empire also saw a wide range of geographical expeditions, in preparation of military expeditions or reasons of prestige: to follow in the footsteps of the great Alexander, who went further than anyone before him.[266] Newly conquered regions had to be "mapped" to be successfully pacified, both for practical and more symbolic reasons.

[256] Solinus, *De Mirabulus Mundi*, 1.51. Translation according to Wild (1981) 95.
[257] Though admittedly, Seneca himself is sceptical of such claims. See *Naturales Quaestiones*, 3.25.11.
[258] See for example Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.51-2.
[259] Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, 10.191-192.
[260] Strabo, *Geographica*, 7.1.5.
[261] Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones,* 6.8.3-4.
[262] Murphy (2004) 163.
[263] Nicolet (1991) 15-24, 29-30, 95-114.
[264] *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 26, 30; on the discovery and conquest of Germany and the Pannonian tribes and their lands.
[265] Strabo, *Geographica*, 3.4.19, in which he laments Roman geographers' slavish following of their Greek predecessors, yet also acknowledges the advances and changes in geographical knowledge made as a result of Roman conquest.
[266] Nicolet (1991) 85-87, with a list of such explorations ranging up to the reign of Hadrian, but showing a definite highpoint during the reign of Augustus.

Within the *Natural History*, we stumble across a number of such cases. Augustus orders a number of geographical treatises on the eastern part of the Mediterranean[267] and had the coastlines of Germany mapped[268] while Claudius is cited as an expert on a number of geographical topics, including Egypt[269] and the Tigris[270]. Titus meanwhile is named as an expert on the shape and size of the world among esteemed Roman geographers, historians and philosophers at the end of book 2. Part of this interest no doubt came from the very practical need for accurate information to govern the empire. Yet discovering new lands (including a rivers source) is also to gain in power and prestige. Silius Italicus, who dedicated his *Punica* to the Flavians, has Jupiter prophesize the grandiose future that awaits the empire under the Flavians. Predictably, Jupiter foresees a seemingly endless string of military successes. Yet he especially praises Vespasian for giving Rome victory over Thule 'unknown till then', as well as being the first Roman to lead an army against the Caledonian forests. [271] Conquests over uncharted territories brought considerable prestige.

This made the discovering and charting of rivers, those lay lines through the landscape, an especially prestigious task. To know a rivers source was to know its essence. To know its essence was to claim some of its fame or glory for uncovering knowledge which had so far eluded other rulers, generals and scholars. This made geographical discoveries the natural terrain of monarchs and thereby also explains why Pliny is persistent in disavowing any direct or personal knowledge of the sources of the Nile. It was not befitting for a mere citizen to lay claim to detailed knowledge of so important and enigmatic a natural wonder that had eluded even Alexander the Great.[272] As Lucan's poetry pointed out, the sources of the Nile had long since passed the terrain of simple scientific curiosity and had become the ambition of megalomaniacal tyrants and kings, a sign of ultimate power.

### 3.5 – *The lay of the land*

Boundaries, highways, essential elements within ancient geographical ordering, semi-anthropomorphic natural entities and symbols of prosperity, prestige and power: rivers take on numerous roles within the *Natural History*. Similar ideas, both in other authors as in Roman history, give some proof of these ideas outside of the *Natural History* as well. When we once again take into consideration the conclusions of the previous chapter, a more solidified image of the meaning and motive behind river god artworks starts to emerge. Pliny might not make many overt comments on the religious qualities of his rivers, but it is easy to see how these can go hand in hand with his own descriptions of the water ways of the empire. Rivers could not only be crucial elements in the basic Roman understanding of landscape and geography, they were individual entities with highly differentiated waters. Religious qualities and geographical ones were bound up together. The Rhine, Danube, Nile and Tiber were only actually worshipped along their banks; they were powerful forces but only within their designated course through the landscape. More interesting still is Pliny's rather persistent use of human experiences to explain natural phenomenon, not only in the case of rivers

[267] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 6.141.
[268] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 2.167.
[269] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.63.
[270] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 6.128.
[271] Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 597-598.
[272] Murphy (2004) 143-144.

but other natural phenomena as well. It sheds some light on river personifications as a whole. In Pliny at least, rivers in their “natural habitat” already showed human-like qualities, further blurring the line between river and personified image.

Yet rivers are more than just features of a landscape: they are objects of knowledge and power, to be discovered and mapped by rulers. The connection between rivers and rulers is pervasive in Roman culture and spreads far beyond the pages of the *Natural History* into everyday life in the empire. With Pliny in mind, we turn from grandiose searches for the sources of the Nile, to more manageable (but not less grandiose) attempts to bridge, channel and divert.

## Chapter 4 – Nature vanquished

We already saw some clear examples of the special relationship between imperial power and geographical knowledge in which rivers played their part as both roads and barriers. To know an area geographically, was to some extent to control it. Pliny's praise for navigable rivers facilitating trade and prosperity has been duly noted, but not all rivers would cooperate so easily with mankind's ambitions. In building bridges, canals and aqueducts, Roman authority channelled and restrained water as it saw fit. The Roman ability to alter the natural landscape was not allowed to be passed by unnoticed. This triumph over nature receives explicit treatment by Roman authors and artists alike in a number of literary sources as well as coinage, monuments and inscriptions. The control over rivers, and water in general, was an important aspect of the Roman understanding of imperial power and civilization.

### 4.1 – *The building of a road*

Statius' *Silvae* are a world away from Pliny's sober geographical treatise. Statius, like Pliny, was directly concerned with nature. Yet in the *Silvae*, occasional poetry for a host of elite clients, it is the Roman triumph over nature which receives unprecedented attention. Throughout the books, Statius takes us along for an extended journey along imperial monuments and through the interiors of expansive (and expensive) villas. The *Silvae* have in the past been dismissed as empty and sycophantic poetry of praise. It is however increasingly recognized that Statius' poetry extends far beyond panegyric, using the villas and palaces of his clients as elaborate backdrops for explorations on the artificial and the real, progress and tradition, civilization and nature. Like the *Natural History*, the *Silvae* were written during the Flavian dynasty, being published around 95 A.D.[273] Again like the *Natural History*, they provide a glimpse of the Roman discourse on power, nature and civilization at a, for this investigation, very interesting point in time.

First and foremost among Statius' clients was the emperor Domitian himself. The emperor had a new road built between Rome and Naples, the Via Domitiana, which considerably shortened voyages to the south and was inaugurated in 95 A.D. This large scale construction project was occasion for Statius to write a poem of praise to the emperor and his new road, his *Silvae* 4.3. As with other of Statius' poems, Domitian might have even ordered the poet to compose a work for the occasion.[274] The new road was indeed an occasion for praise. Domitian's builders saw themselves confronted with marshes, rugged terrain and an unruly river which needed to be overcome before the road could be completed. In the poem, Statius' managed to encapsulate Rome's imagined triumph over nature, nowhere more so than in connection to the Vulturnus river.

Statius opens his poem with the sound of the road being built, a 'monstrous sound'.[275] It 'is not the sound of Libyan squadrons' i.e. the troops of Hannibal, nor some other foreign invader.[276] Neither is it Nero 'breaching the waters and clearing the mountains as he brings in murky swamps'.[277] Instead,

[273] Newlands (2002) 39.
[274] Smolenaars (2006) 225.
[275] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.1.
[276] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.4-6.
[277] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.7-8.

Domitian is brought to stage and presented as the pinnacle of proper behaviour, the just and pious ruler *par excellence* who strives to make his subject's lives easier.[278] Statius continues with a description of the road building itself. Some workers 'fell the forest and strip the mountains, (…) others toil to dry up thirsty puddles and lead of lesser streams. These hands could have hollowed out Athos and separated lamenting Helle's mournful sea with a bridge that did not float. To these obedient, Ino's isthmus might have mingled seas did the gods not forbid passage.'[279] The vastness of the endeavour is undeniable. Domitian's workers, and by direct extension Domitian himself, completely alter the landscape in their wake; no obstacle is too great for them. Again comparisons are drawn to despots and tyrants: Xerxes and his bridge, Nero and his plans to cut a channel through the Isthmus of Corinth. The comparison with figures of such dubious reputation has lead Newlands to read this passage as a literary "fault line" through the text, an expression of the anxiety felt by Statius over the vast power Domitian wielded over the landscape.[280] Yet such statements actually reflect positively on Domitian. As a pious ruler, backed by the gods and the son of a god himself, he succeeds where petty eastern tyrants and degenerate monarchs have failed. For Domitian, the ambition to bridge the Hellespont is not hubris, but firmly within his grasp. The only thing stopping him from cutting the channel through the Isthmus of Corinth is piety. Statius emphasizes the connection between power and the ability to control the natural landscape, above all the ability to control and redirect water. Within the micro-cosmos of *Silvae* 4.3, a good ruler is also one who is successful in his ambitions to subjugate nature.

The praise for Domitian's ability to subjugate nature reaches its crescendo in the speech made by the Volturnus river. On their course to Naples, Domitian's builders bumped into the Volturnus, the largest river in Southern Italy and a formidable obstacle which had to be bridged, and before that dredged and channeled.[281] In Statius' poem, the river god himself appears out of his waters, 'leaning against the mighty arch of Caesar's bridge' in word directly inspired by Virgil's Tiberinus.[282] The Volturnus addresses the emperor directly:

'Kind orderer of my plains, who bound me in the law of a straight channel when I spread over distant valleys nor knew to keep my limits, see, now I, the turbulent bully, that in time past barely tolerated imperiled barks, I bear a bridge and am tramped by crossing feet. I that was wont to carry off land and whirl woods, begin (ah, the shame!) to be a river. But I give you thanks and my servitude is worthwhile because I have yielded under *your* guidance and at *your* command, and because men shall read of you as supreme arbiter and conqueror of my bank. And now you tend me with a copious channel, nor let me lie in squalor, and broadly wipe away the sorry shame of barren soil, so that the gulf of the Tyrrhene sea does not wash against my sandy, mud-heavy current, even as Cinyphian Bagrada glides by his silent banks amid Punic fields, but I so flow that I can challenge the smooth sea with my shining course and neighbouring Liris with my limpid stream.'[283]

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[278] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.9-26.
[279] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.50-60.
[280] Newlands (2002) 284-326.
[281] Newlands (2002) 301.
[282] Also confirming the enduring popularity of the image of the Tiber created by Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.31-34; Smolenaars (2006) 229.
[283] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.73-94.

Though the sentiments expressed are to be found throughout Roman literature, few passages can rival this speech in its sheer explicitness and triumphal attitude. The river has quite literally been conquered and subjugated as if it were a captive in a war. Building bridges and channeling streams is a militaristic activity, fittingly so considering Pliny's sometimes militaristically inclined descriptions of nature. Yet unlike captives, the Volturnus enjoys its new state and is grateful. The Volturnus was an unruly and wild river before, but has now become girdled and civilized through its new bridge. Before it was sterile and muddy, now Domitian has made it fertile and suitable for navigation; in other words useful to man. The way Volturnus stresses Domitian's personal involvement and responsibility is noticeable. Not only does the river itself congratulate the emperor on his victory, but future men will read of it: both in an inscription prominently placed on the bridge as well as Statius' poem. The civilizing force of Domitian stretches even further. Several authors have remarked on the literary references in the latter part of the Volturnus' speech.[284] The river mentions its formerly mud-heavy current, as well as the sluggish Bagrada. Both can be read in a poetic light, as references to Callimachus' ideas on poetry. Instead of the mighty but filth-laden river of epic, the Volturnus is now a clear and shining stream, equating itself to the poetics of a Callimachus or a Horace. Not only has the emperor made the river navigable, he also made it literate, a conveyor of "modern" cultural attitudes.

### 4.2 – *Binding the river*

As Statius already expressed with his awe-filled language, the building of a road was a considerable endeavour, devouring large amounts of money and men, both in construction and in upkeep. Under Augustus, Claudius, Trajan and others, the empire expanded considerably through military conquest. Administrative divisions were reorganized, new cities or forts were founded. To keep these regions under control and to efficiently transport troops and supplies across land, Rome experienced a rapid expansion of its road network. In an effort to minimize costs and building time, Roman road builders almost always seem to have preferred following a river instead of crossing it, which explains the far-from straight pattern of the Roman road network. Possibly, Roman builders also had some practical considerations in mind: rivers usually flow through valleys or relatively flat land. They also provided a steady and copious source of drinking water for travellers (a considerable advantage when moving legions), as well as allowing river borne traffic to move in unison with land-based travel (again useful when moving troops and material).[285] Lastly, a relative lack of bridges could have defensive advantages in frontier regions in case of uprisings or incursions, as shown in the previous chapter. The peculiar effect this had on a landscape can be seen in the Rhône valley: of the seven cities along the Rhône, six are situated on the eastern side of the river's bank, along with the road through the region.[286]

Yet for geographical and logistical reasons, a river could not always be followed, as in the case of the Via Domitiana. With so many remains of works of Roman civil engineering scattered across Europe, we might be tempted to equate this with our own road network and see the empire as being densely populated with roads, bridges and the like. O'Connor lists the remains of some 330 stone bridges, 34

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[284] Newlands (2002) 307-308, Smolenaars (2006) 232-233.
[285] O'Connor (1993) 5.
[286] See O'Connor (1993) 17, map 2.

timber bridges and 54 bridges incorporated into aqueducts, scattered throughout the empire.[287] He also estimates that a considerable number of timber bridges once existed, but have inevitably been lost due to the fact that wood is easy to decay and destroy.[288] This might seem like a large number, especially when taking into account the many bridges that might have once been. Yet spread over the entire Mediterranean and northern Europe even such a large numbers leads to a relatively low distribution of bridges per region. Furthermore, these bridges came into being over a course of many centuries, starting with the early Republican bridges over the Tiber right down to Valerian and his men being forced to build and arched bridge for the Parthian king in 260 A.D. As a comparison: some 2000 bridges were constructed during the period of 1940 to 1970 in the Netherlands alone.[289] What is important here is not so much that the Roman Empire did not have the resources or technology to produce bridges on the scale of a modern, industrialized nation – of course it didn't. O'Connor is still justified in speaking of Roman bridges simply as 'the Roman achievement'.[290] Rather, it is important to consider that we have grown accustomed to bridges as an everyday element in our lives: there's never one far away when we have to cross a river. To a citizen of the empire however, bridges (especially stone ones) were a rarer sight and most citizens had to rely on primitive wooden constructions, ferries, rafts or simple swimming to cross a waterway. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, such primitive ways of crossing rivers were not only time-consuming and difficult but potentially lethal. Keeping this in mind, we can begin to understand some of the importance Domitian's bridge might have held to a Roman audience and in fact the reason why Statius spends such lavish praise on it. Or, as Pliny the Younger spurs on one of his poet-friends writing about the Dacian Wars: 'You will sing of rivers turned into new channels, and rivers bridged for the first time (…)'.[291] The actual fighting comes almost as an afterthought.

The reason why bridges were relatively rare was simply because they were costly to build, consuming time, resources and workers. Behind even the smallest bridge hides a world of logistics and planning. Possible crossing sites had to be explored and planned in advance of the actual building of the road; calculations needed to be made as to bridge length, height and the like; specialized personnel and equipment had to be brought to the site (and in the latter case, set up at the site itself); workers, material and supplies had to be allocated to the bridge-building project; the site had to be levelled; scaffolding put in place; all this before the actual construction could begin. This is only considering smaller bridges over relatively small streams. Bridges crossing deep valleys or large rivers such as the Danube or the Rhine brought with them problems of their own, such as the need for the building of piers, which in itself could require the damming or diverting of a river. It has been estimated that the Roman stone bridges were second-generation constructions, replacing earlier wooden bridges or crossing points built either by the Roman military or the local population before the area was considered pacified enough to erect a more permanent crossing point.[292] If so, this would mean that both personnel and materials had to be specially transferred to the site, instead of being part of a larger road-building project making its way from point A to B and building bridges where necessary.

[287] O'Connor (1993) 187, with catalogue on 193-204.

[288] O'Connor (1993) 132.

[289] NBS, 'Bruggen. Categoriaal onderzoek wederopbouw', 6. Accessed on 14-06-2012, at http://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/u4/Bruggen.pdf.

[290] O'Connor (1993) 187.

[291] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 8.4

[292] O'Connor (1993) 132.

This would also make stone bridges even more potent symbols of Roman might: a wonder of civilization and engineering bestowed upon a city or region. Pliny the Elder, describing the wonders of Rome, is almost apologetic for leaving out 'all the bridges erected at such great cost.'[293]

Such an interpretation is corroborated by the frequency with which bridges are adorned with both inscriptions and triumphal arches. The Volturnus already referenced to future men "reading" of Domitian's great deeds in taming the river. The vast majority of such inscriptions record the emperor (at times together the local Roman authority) as ultimately responsible for the building of the bridge.[294] As far away as north-western Spain, an inscription on a small pillar standing at the eastern end of the bridge over the river Bibey and a considerable distance from nearby cities, records Trajan and his official titles as the one 'who reconstructed this bridge at his expense'.[295] It is noteworthy that such an inscription should be placed near a small and relatively insignificant bridge in a far-away corner of the empire (or that Trajan is mentioned as having personally intervened with its reconstruction in the first place). Even though the locals would have undoubtedly had some trouble reading the actual text, the message is nevertheless clear: Roman might reaches everywhere, even – or rather, especially – in the far flung corners of the empire.

We return to the Via Domitiana. Right after the Volturnus finishes his piece, Statius takes us further along the new highway. As the river god spoke 'a marble stretch of road had risen in a great spine. Its doorway and auspicious threshold was an arch, gleaming with the warrior leader's trophies and all Liguria's quarries, large as the bow that crowns the clouds with rain.'[296] Statius is vague on what arch exactly this was supposed to be, yet the poet might very well be referring to a triumphal arch on the bridge itself.[297]

Triumphal arches in fact seem to have decorated a considerable number of bridges in the empire. Whether there was one on the new bridge is unclear, but a similar example is archeologically attested along the same road. This arch, made of brick, is wedged between two man-made cliffs and honours the emperors' achievement in cutting through the Monte Grillo so his road might pass straight to Cumae. Niches in the structure make clear that it was meant to house honorary statuary.[298] Domitian was following an imperial tradition in decorating his road (and possibly, bridge) with statuary and arches. Both archaeological and numismatic evidence suggest that Augustus was the first to build such "triumphal bridges". Three series of coinage from 17/16 B.C., most likely struck in Colonia Patricia on the Guadalquivir, commemorates a large-scale repair project on the Spanish road system, initiated by Augustus.[299] On denarius type 1, two equestrian statues stand atop triumphal arches resting on a bridge, accompanied by trophies. Denarius type 2 meanwhile depicts a single arch resting on a bridge, with the emperor in a chariot, crowned by victory. At the base of the arch, two small ships prows are depicted, traditionally symbolizing victory over water. The most

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[293] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historiae,* 36.125.

[294] O'Connor (1991) 38-39.

[295] The former bridge being constructed under Nerva and having fallen in disrepair. Cited in O'Connor (1993) 39, 113-114.

[296] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.95-100.

[297] Smolenaars believes it to be the arch at Sinuessa, see Smolenaars (2006) 234.

[298] Kleiner (1991) 186.

[299] All three are depicted in Kleiner (1991) plate 1.

grandiose of all is the Spanish type 3, a series of aurea: the scheme is the same as type 2, but the ships prows are missing while Augustus rides in an elephant-drawn chariot, a mode of transportation only fit for world conquerors. Epigraphic evidence meanwhile points to at least one Augustan triumphal arch on the Via Augusta near Ossigi.[300]

Augustus had not fought any wars in the region, certainly not in the years 17/16 B.C. The triumph here is not over human foes, but over nature itself. Of course it could be argued that these were belated commemorations of the emperor's victory over Anthony and other contestants. Yet the coin legends, directly mentioning Augustus' road repairs[301], make clear that this was not their primary meaning. The emperor is depicted triumphant not (just) over Anthony, but the river over which his bridges were build. If the images on the Spanish coins do indeed somewhat faithfully represent actual Augustan monuments, the winged Victory, the ships prows and the elephant-drawn chariot[302] heighten the symbolism to an unprecedented scale. All three point towards an all-encompassing triumph not just over a single river, but over nature itself. We already saw in the previous chapter that the Augustan era saw considerable usual of the visual and literary language of world dominion, expressed in the *Res Gestae*, poetry and above all, Agrippa's map. These triumphant bridges formed part of the achievements Augustus based his claims one, as well as spreading his message of world dominion to the far reaches of the empire in a visually striking manner.

Caligula strived to make a similar point by having his triumph over the waves on a pontoon bridge over the Bay of Naples with the express purpose of outdoing both Darius (who bridged the Bosphorus) as well as Xerxes (who failed to bridge the Hellespont).[303] Yet, despite Caligula's ambitions, the greatest imperial bridging achievement of all undoubtedly belonged to Trajan and his architect Apollonius. At around 1100 meters in length the great bridge over the Danube was most likely the longest and largest of all Roman bridges[304] and an achievement universally lauded by ancient authors. Besides Pliny the Younger, Cassius Dio considered the bridges Trajan's greatest achievement and spends considerable space discussing the details of its construction.[305] Even Procopius makes note of the bridge in the 6th century A.D.[306] Though only part of a single stone pier remains, the images on Trajan's column make clear that the bridge was decorated with at least a single monumental arch decorated with trophies.[307] A number of Trajanic sesterci, dating to his fifth consulship and minted in Rome, also depict a bridge with arched on both sides, topped by suits of

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[300] Kleiner (1991) 189.

[301] All coins bear the legend QUOD VIAE MVN SVNT.

[302] Pompey the "world conqueror" was famously known for introducing an elephant-drawn chariot to Rome during his African triumph, only to have his plan turn into an awkward failure when the elephants would not fit through the city gates, see Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historiae* 8.4. Yet where the great Pompey failed, Augustus succeeded, be it in the form of statuary.

[303] Suetonius, *Caligula*, 19, 1-3, and Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 59.17.1-11. That the allusions to the Persian kings might be a later addition only strengthens the case: successfully subduing the waters of a river or bay was considered a short-hand for (despotic) power.

[304] O'Connor (1993) 142-143.

[305] Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana*, 68.13.1-6.

[306] Procopius, *De Aedificiis* 4.6.11-16.

[307] See scenes 99 and 101. The former shows traces of the decoration on the arch. O'Connor (1993) 143, figure 117; Kleiner (1991) Plate I, figure 1.

armor and weaponry.[308] There is no legend on the coin itself, but the date of the coins make a depiction of the Danube bridge the most likely scenario.[309] Undoubtedly, the triumphal arche(s) on the Danube bridge had a military connotation, as the Dacian wars were still lingering and the region had yet to be fully pacified. Given the earlier examples, as well as the great achievement in building the longest bridge the empire had known, makes it clear that Trajan wanted to express his mastery over nature's forces as much as his mastery of Dacia. The two of course went hand in hand: Trajan as world conqueror, vanquishing both hostile natural and human forces. A similar sentiment is expressed in a scene on Trajan's column reminiscent of Statius' poetry: Danuvius watches on peacefully as the Roman legions march over his waters on a pontoon bridge.

### 4.3 – *The power of water*

We left Statius at the Volturnus bridge with its arch. Statius moves his poem south, emphasizing the great speed and ease of travel along the way. Finally, we reach Cumae where 'a holier bard begins, we must be silent'.[310] The Sybil herself comes out to greet the reader and pour praise on Domitian. She gives Domitian's construction activities not just her blessing but makes them the subject of a long-awaited prophecy: 'I said it: "He will come. Fields and river wait, wait! He will come by heaven's favour, he that shall raise the foul forest and powdery sands with lofty bridge and causeway".'[311] If that weren't enough, Statius raises her praise a pitch higher and lauds Domitian as *Natura melior potentiorque*, 'better and mightier than Nature'.[312] After all, *if* Domitian was lord of the skies, he would have made better arrangements: India would have been damp with generous clouds, Libya would have received plenty of water and Haemus would have been comfortably warm.[313]

Alas, Domitian was *not* the lord of the skies and the world remained imperfect. All three Flavians however made considerable effort to at least make the world a somewhat more civilized place for the inhabitants of the empire. Like the bridging of rivers, channeling rivers was by its very nature an occupation of rulers and civilizers. As Strabo notes of the canals along the Nile: 'Now it is impossible, perhaps, altogether to prevent overflows of this kind, but it is the part of good rulers to afford all possible aid.'[314] Alexander the Great himself inspected the canals and made repairs were necessary.[315] Hercules, that civilizer *par excellence*, himself dug the channel which was to become the Straits of Gibraltar 'and so changed the face of nature.'[316] Partly because of these famous forbears, the digging of canals was an activity which could bring considerable prestige to an emperor. One of the greatest marvels of Rome was the emperor Claudius' attempt to drain the Fulcine Lake, as task which required a massive investment in men and means and state of the art technology; 'operations

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[308] Hill (1989) 105-106.

[309] Kleiner (1991) 187, who notes that other scholars have interpreted this bridge as being the Pons Sublicius. However, we don't know of any renovation of the Pons Sublicius in these year and given the great effort in building the Danube bridge, it is likely that Trajan wanted to commemorate his achievement in the capital.

[310] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.120.

[311] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.124-127.

[312] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.135.

[313] Statius, *Silvae*, 4.3.137-138.

[314] Strabo, *Geographia*, 16.1.10.

[315] Strabo, *Geographia*, 16.1.11.

[316] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia,* 3.1

which only those who witnessed them can envisage and no human utterance can describe.'[317] Pliny the Younger likewise reminds Trajan that the financing of a major canal near Nicomedia would be great and impressive enough to be worthy of his eminent position as emperor.[318]

Far from Rome, in the province of Syria in 75 A.D., governor Marcus Ulpius Trajanus (father of the future emperor) oversaw a large scale canal project along the Orontes which seems to have made similar claims to greatness as Claudius' draining project.[319] We know of this project because of a two meter high, milestone-like column bearing an inscription honouring the achievement, presumably one of a number of copies set up along the canal itself, found along the Orontes in a village about seven kilometres from Antioch.[320] Roughly the first half of the inscription is occupied by the various names and titles of Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, while the latter half mentions the governor and troops responsible for the actual work. The effort was considerable: four legions were involved in the digging of the channel of some three miles long. Adding to the achievement were a number of bridges built over the channel itself. Doubtlessly the canal had a practical military purpose: to ensure fast transfer of troops and goods to the eastern frontier. But, as with the inscription near Trajan's bridge in a far corner of Spain, prestige and power played their role here as well. The inscription mentions *Dipotamia fluminis ductum.*[321] The implication is that the emperor Vespasian and his heirs have – to quote Statius – bound the river in the law of a straight channel. The size of the project was so considerable that the area was now to be known as Dipotamia: land of two rivers. The new canal was to be seen as a man-made river, with bridges and a quiet, easily navigable stream that could match the great Orontes. Again, like the Trajanic bridge in Spain few members of the local population would have been able to read this creative play on words. Yet the very existence of such a large, inscribed column (of which multiple copies might have existed) near the canal as well as the fact that it was written in Latin would have made the message clear: Roman power is not only able to reconfigure the natural landscape, but can equal and improve upon nature itself. Such an image might have quite consciously been fostered by local Roman authority. Trajan's staff (possibly even the governor himself) would most likely have been responsible for the placing of these inscriptions.

Yet another set of inscriptions from the same region and time period give some room for nuance. The emperor was not the only one who was capable of altering nature. A set of local Greek inscriptions strike quite a different note. Only one has been preserved more or less complete and stand at 1.70m in height. It was found on the west bank of the Orontes, near the remains of a bridge.[322] It turns out that Trajan was not the only one constructing waterways: another canal was dug by workers from the city of Antioch itself, somewhere in between 73 and 74 A.D. and most likely on order of the governor.[323] Though Trajan is named in the inscription, the execution of the project seems to have been primarily a local affair, drawing workers from various towns in the neighbourhood of the city. The imperial family is duly named, but their titles are incomplete or

[317] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia,* 36.124, Suetonius, *Claudius*, 20.
[318] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.61
[319] Described and published in Van Berchem (1981).
[320] Van Berchem (1981) 185.
[321] Line 12-13, Van Berchem (1981) 186.
[322] Feisse (1985) 79, stele A.
[323] Feissel (1985) 84-86.

missing.[324] There is not a word about imperial responsibility, nor is there any mention of the landscape-changing power of the empire which characterized the Latin text. Rather, it devotes considerable length to mentioning the various towns the workers are from, and how many meters of the canal each group of workers dug. This inscription is of course no radical departure from the above. The canal is depicted as a highly important moment in the life of the city; an unmistakable sign of civic pride and might. The imperial family is duly mentioned and at least shares in some of the city's glory. Yet they offer an unremarkable, everyday counterpoint to the grandiose claims of imperial propaganda. Such inscriptions probably had endless counterparts throughout the empire. Imperial power could achieve civic projects on a greater scale or of a different nature than the cities of the empire, working with more means and towards the (perceived) common good. But the emperor was not the only one to lay claim on the ability to change the natural landscape.

### 4.4 – *The good life*

Unlike Xerxes, Alexander or Hercules, Roman emperors had the ability to not only channel or bridge existing rivers, but to actually build new ones. Together with the roads, the aqueducts are the most recognizable and celebrated aspects of Roman civic engineering. With the remains of hundreds of aqueducts spread throughout the empire, what interests me here is not so much their detailed workings, but their similarities with bridging or channelling projects. Like the triumphant attitudes towards bridges, the building of aqueducts was neatly tied up with power, empire and the control over nature. It was in fact a quintessentially Roman thing to do, part of the Roman way of life. Greek authors of the early empire, largely unfamiliar with such large-scale hydrological installations, were generous in their awe and praise: '[I]n my opinion the three most magnificent works of Rome, in which the greatness of her empire is best seen, are the aqueducts, the paved roads and the construction of the sewers'.[325] Dionysius opinion is echoed almost word for word by Strabo: 'the Romans had the best foresight in those matters which the Greeks made but little account of, such as the construction of roads and aqueducts, and of sewers that could wash out the filth of the city into the Tiber. (…) So great is the amount of water brought by the aqueducts that veritable rivers run through the city and the sewers (…)'.[326] Greek states, especially during the Hellenistic era, were familiar with aqueducts and Hellenistic Asia Minor had several modest aqueducts long before Roman conquest of the region.[327] Yet the scale and the appreciation of such hydrological projects were uniquely Roman. Strabo's comment is telling in another way as well: by their very nature, aqueducts could be seen as artificial, man-made rivers. Like natural rivers and springs, the aqueducts of Rome each brought their own, highly distinct waters to the city, with the Aqua Marcia being praised as the best of the lot.[328] Because aqueducts were depended on water from sources and springs, like rivers, they were responded to seasonal shifts in water levels or to excessive rainfall. Their waters gushed out continuously, with no long-term storage facilities or ways to temporarily shut-off the system.[329]

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[324] Feissel (1985) 84.

[325] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae*, 3.67.5.

[326] Strabo, *Geographica*, 5.3.8. Note also Pliny the Elder's mention of the sewers of Rome as 'seven rivers meeting in one channel', Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 36.105.

[327] See Hodge (1991) 24-45.

[328] Frontinus, *De Aquis*, 91.5; Pliny the Elder who calls it a gift of the gods, *Naturalis Historia*, 31.41; see also the angered divine reaction to Nero's swimming trip in the source of the Aqua Marcia in chapter 2.

[329] Hodge (1991) 2.

The sacredness of springs and streams also channelled through the aqueducts, as we saw in chapter 2 when the Vestal virgins used water from both natural springs and urban fountains in their dedication ritual.[330]

Like bridges and channels, aqueducts were a huge investment in time, men and material.[331] Next to the surveying and levelling, the transport of men and materials and the building of arches, cisterns and underground pipelines, aqueducts also needed continued maintenance works to keep the channel unclogged and the water running free. The gargantuan effort involved made Pliny exclaim that 'there has never been anything more remarkable in the whole world.'[332] Though the vast majority of an aqueducts' course lay underground, the sheer visual impact of those parts of the aqueducts which ran aboveground would have been considerable in the relatively empty landscapes of the Roman empire. The aqueducts were perhaps Rome's clearest and grandest statement of its ability to alter the natural landscape. It is therefore little surprise that, like channels and bridges, emperors wanted their names intimately connected with the construction of these artificial waterways. The emperor was considered personally responsible for the water supply of Rome.[333] As the *caput mundi*, it received generous attention and was provided with eleven aqueducts. The Aqua Claudia, Aqua Traiana and the Aqua Alexandrina: they all betray the status of aqueducts as wonders of construction on equal footing with temples or theatres, to which emperors wanted to attach their names. Yet it was not just in Rome that the emperor strove to build their artificial rivers. Augustus set the example. Not only did he restore malfunctioning aqueducts in Rome itself and double the output of the Aqua Marcia[334], he also had a hand in financing aqueducts and similar water conduits throughout his newly acquired empire, with a clear emphasis on Italian cities.[335] Later, aqueducts throughout the empire were outfitted with inscriptions, sometimes directly holding the emperor responsible for their construction, maintenance or repair, otherwise merely mentioning his name.[336] Cities throughout the empire occasionally made efforts to finance and construct aqueducts of their own volition, yet from the second century onwards it became customary and later even mandatory to ask the emperor for permission.[337] Financial donations by the emperor to the construction of aqueducts were common, even if donations to the upkeep of older aqueducts weren't.[338] Possibly because maintenance work was hugely expensive but did not have quite the same level of prestige as the completion of an entirely new aqueduct. This is not to say that emperor where the only ones to donate financial means to the building of aqueducts. Wealthy local dignitaries, knights and senators

[330] Tacitus, *Historiae*, 4.53.
[331] Of which ancient authors were well aware, see for example Pliny the Elder's earlier comment on the great cost of bridges or Dionysius of Halicarnassus judges the aqueducts and roads great wonders of the empire not just because of their usefulness but also because of the magnitude of the money involved in building them: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae*, 3.67.5.
[332] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 36.123.
[333] Bruun (1991) 7.
[334] *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 20.
[335] Augustus had was (partially) responsible for the construction of aqueducts and similar waterconduits in Pola, Venafrum, Capua, Brixia, Lucus Feroniae, Caere, Fulginiae, Miturnae, Puteoli, Napels, Baiae, Misenum, Nola, Cumae, Acerrae and Pompeii. See Eck (1987) 72.
[336] Hodge (1991) 13.
[337] Eck (1987) 70.
[338] Eck (1987) 71-72, 76-77.

could and did chip in just as well. It is however the emperor who is honoured above all other sponsors when involved, while the result of his donations were visually present throughout the empire. The central authority in Rome was directly connected with the water supply of cities throughout the empire. Pliny's comment to Trajan on the Nicomedian aqueduct is telling: 'the finished work will combine utility with beauty, and will be well worthy of your reign.'[339]

Only a very small amount of the total volume of water transferred to the city of Rome found its way into private homes, and then mostly those of the rich. A number of scholars have, rather successfully, argued that a private water connection was a considerable privilege, especially in the city of Rome.[340] Augustus had his "ownership" of the city's waters set down in a number of *senatus consulta* and laws, which were kept up by his successors. The emperor held sole responsibility in granting this privilege and those wishing to tap the city's water supply for their gardens or baths needed to petition him personally. After gaining permission, there were still various bureaucratic hurdles to take, as well as a modified, "state-approved" plumbing system to install, making sure that the individual in question did not tap too much water from the city's supply. The right to a personal share of the water supply did not transfer with an individual to a new property, nor did it transfer to the new owner of a property which had previously received permission.[341] Of course this once again underlines the intimate relationship between the control of water and authority, not only in grand architectural statements, but also in the everyday access to water. Illegal tapping would have obviously been prevalent as well, but the emperor's claim to the city's water supply remains. Outside of Rome, emperors might have made grandiose claims in building or repairing aqueducts, but the final authority over the distribution of water was left to the cities themselves.[342]

The vast majority of the volume of water that reached the city of Rome (or most other cities, for that matter) was not intended for private villas but for public fountains and bathhouses. For cities throughout the empire, this was the sole reason for building aqueducts. Cities such as Pompeii grew and flourished on wells and rainwater-filled cisterns alone.[343] Aqueducts usually came much later, when a city was wealthy enough to afford such expenditure (or important enough for an emperor's munificence). Aqueducts were a luxury, not a necessity which at least partially accounts for their unanimously positive reception. They were a symbol of civic pride, a sure sign of a city's success, economically, politically or both. Costs were huge and stakes were high: Nicomedia almost bankrupted itself in trying to build one.[344] Yet when a city did succeed there was cause for artistic celebration, for example in the form of decorated public fountains, the latter being especially popular in 2$^{nd}$ and third century Asia Minor.[345] Here our river god artworks once again come to the fore. Though their exact places of origins are often shrouded in mystery, we know of a number of examples that were part of public fountains or bathhouses.[346] Precise archaeological evidence is

[339] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.37.
[340] Eck (1987) 83-87, Bruun (1991) 63-76, De Kleijn (2001) 98-105.
[341] Private baths being an important exception, Kleijn (2001) 101.
[342] Eck (1987) 68-70.
[343] Hodge (1991) 48-49.
[344] Pliny the Younger, *Epistulae*, 10.37.
[345] Hodge (1991) 8-10.
[346] *Public fountains*: the most prominent examples are the Capitoline Tiber and Nile, as well as the Marforio/Tiber sculpture. *Bathhouses*: a painting of Sarno above the frigidarium in the Terme del Sarno in

lacking, but it seems reasonable to suppose that a considerable number of the artworks in chapter one were once set up in baths or fountains, both public and private, especially in Rome where the majority of statues seem to originate from. The city had a large number of decorated fountains: Agrippa alone supposedly decorated Rome's fountains with over 300 pieces of statuary.[347]

Bathhouses were just as well endowed with aqueduct water as were public fountains. Again we find river deities in these locations. Roman attitudes to the bathhouses of their empire were complex; too complex to handle in any detail here. However, it is worth repeating that they were seen by many as one of the foundational stones of Roman or indeed civilized life. Though often open to criticism from Roman moralists, they nevertheless were also one of the great pleasures of life in the empire, as well as an important cultural attraction with large quantities of artworks.[348] Within this atmosphere of abundant and civilized living, river god imagery would fit in perfectly. The artistic iconography of the baths evoked a world of leisure, luxury, (erotic) beauty and abundance, themes reflected in river god imagery.[349] The same themes were invoked in luxurious villa gardens throughout the empire. The villa garden, and the Roman villa more generally, was an unmistakable sign of the subjugation of nature by man. Though in danger of excess (and charges of luxuria by moralists), when done with some moderation and an eye towards production (in the form of for example fruit trees) instead of sterile display, the Roman villa garden was where civilized nature reached its peak.[350]

### 4.5 – *Rivers in chains*

Triumphal arches, channels and aqueducts: all played their role in promulgating the image of Rome as a conqueror of nature. Silius Italicus, in the same prophecy of Jupiter mentioned in chapter three, has the king of the gods praise Vespasian for setting banks to restrain the Rhine.[351] Likewise 'when the Danube refuses a passage to the Roman legions, he [Domitian] shall be victorious and retain the river in the land of the Sarmatians'. [352] The sentiments expressed here are by now familiar enough, but their context within the prophecy are of interest: banking and crossing rivers goes hand in hand with 'subduing the palm-groves of Idume', 'conquering the North', 'triumph over the East' and being more poetic than Orpheus himself.[353] We saw the same militaristic language in Pliny, where rivers together with other natural elements act in almost militaristic fashion and in Statius, were the Volturnus is subdued and bound as if a captive of war.

The inspiration for such militaristic language can at least partially be traced to the ritual of the Roman triumph. During this display of conquest representations of conquered regions, cities and peoples were paraded through the city as part of the triumphal parade. The form of these representations is

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Pompeii, the Nile mosaic at Leptis Magna, two statues of the Menander from Milete, a river deity from Ephesos and a fragment of a river god statue from the Baths of Caracalla, see Klementa (1993) 224-225. Dunbabin furthermore mentions two river deities from the Gymnasium Baths in Salamis, see Dunbabin (1987) 27.

[347] Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, 36.121.

[348] Dunbabin (1987) 6-9.

[349] Dunbabin (1987) 12-32.

[350] See in general, Pavlovskis (1973).

[351] Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 599.

[352] Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3. 616-617.

[353] Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 3.600, 614-615, 619-621.

not at all clear. Different sources seem to imply three dimensional models, personifications, paintings as well as tapestries.[354] Placards with the names of conquered cities, peoples or regions might have accompanied such displays. However, river gods seem to have been something of a staple element in all these representations and when they are described, it is always in their classical, reclining pose. Ovid in particular seems to have had a fondness for such imagery. River deities pop up a number of times in the triumphal processions he describes. Trying to woo a girl during an imagined triumph of Augustus over the Parthian, Ovid tells her: 'That's Euphrates, his brow crowned with reeds: that'll be Tigris with the long green hair. I make those Armenians, that's Persia's Danaän crown: that was a town in the hills of Achaemenia.'[355] The poet seems to have something similar in mind when he tries to envision Tiberius' triumph in his *Tristia.* He mentions a Rhine 'discolored with blood' and with 'broken horns' as part of the general's triumphal procession.[356] The same images crops up in his *Epistulae ex Ponto*: in this case Ovid envisions a second triumph for Tiberius, again with statue of the Rhine, 'hair trailing under broken reeds'.[357] Whether or not any these depictions were real or imagined, for Ovid they constituted an important, or at least a poetically appealing part of the Roman triumph. Ovid is not alone in these descriptions. Propertius claims not to sing of 'of Egypt and Nile, when crippled, in mourning, he ran through the city, with seven imprisoned streams', which seems to imply a similar triumphal image. We already mentioned the artistic impact the triumph of Julius Caesar might have had, when he ordered a statue of the Nile carried on a litter during his triumphal procession in Rome, accompanied by other geographical representations including the Rhine, the Rhone and Oceanus.[358] Tacitus likewise makes mention of 'mimic mountains, rivers and battles' being carried around in the triumph of Germanicus in 17 A.D.[359] Lastly there are the triumphal arches with imagery from both conquests and the actual triumphal processions. The arch of Titus depicts the river Jordan on the eastern façade, being carried on a parade float or a *feruculum*, usually meant to display the spoils of war. The river is accompanied in by senators, soldiers, sacrificial oxen and the like.

As noted in the previous chapter, power and geography go hand in hand and rivers were just as potent a symbol as models of battlefields or displays of captives. Strongly connected as they were to a certain region, they were of course the geographical symbols *par excellence* to be shown as a reference to a certain place. When Lucan speaks of pharaoh Sesostris drinking of the rivers Rhine and Po as an expression of his conquest of Europe, this is more than mere rhetoric.[360] If mapping a river or discovering its source was to be considered an activity fit for kings and emperors, than dragging a chained river deity through the city is triumphal procession together with captives and booty was one of the more potent ways of displaying the complete dominion of Rome and its emperor over a certain territory. Also, it was the most important way of sharing these great geographical discoveries with the Roman people. As an oft-quoted passage from Polybius has it: the triumph is an event 'in which the generals bring the actual spectacle of their achievements before the eyes of their fellow

[354] Beard (2007) 179.
[355] Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, 1.223-226.
[356] Ovid, *Tristia*, 4.2.41-42.
[357] Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, 3.4.107-108.
[358] Florus, *Epitome*, 2.13.88.
[359] Tacitus, *Annales*, 2.41.
[360] Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, 10.277-278.

citizens'.[361] The triumph was a spectacle and a stage. Not just the rivers, but also the mountains, towns, captives and feats of battle on display were first and foremost meant to awe and dazzle. Such geographic representations displayed the outside world captive and subjugated to a Roman audience, with the emperor or general ruling supreme over it. An interesting parallel can be drawn with that other stock element of the triumph: the chained captives of war, usually in native dress. Both rivers and captives are depicted chained or otherwise incapacitated by Roman military might. Both, it might be suggested, can now be civilized and further pacified as newly acquired parts of the empire. Virgil underlines this connection between captive men and rivers when he has both conquered tribes in their native dress and conquered rivers with their bridges parade in front of a triumphant Augustus.[362]

For many it would have been one of the few times they came into direct and vivid contact with the geographical reach of the empire, be it in the form of far-away rivers or exotic cultures. In a world where both maps and (map-)literacy was rare, these images of shackled and wounded river deities functioned as a vivid way of expressing dominion over a newly acquired or pacified geographical region. Geographical displays were not just metaphorical. Pliny reminds us that balsam only grows in Judea after which he mentions: 'this variety of shrub was exhibited to the capital by the emperors Vespasian and Titus; and it is a remarkable fact that ever since the time of Pompey the Great even trees have figured among the captives in our triumphal processions. The balsam-tree is now a subject of Rome, and pays tribute together with the race to which it belongs (…).'[363] The exotic and the strange, both in tangible (a balsam plant) and metaphoric (a statue of the river Jordan) form, on display for the Roman eye to gaze upon and covet.

361 Polybius, *Histories*, 6.15.8.

362 Virgil, *Aeneid*, 8.720-728.

363 Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia,* 12.111-112, see also Murphy (2004) 162-163.

## Chapter 5 – Imperial waters: some conclusions

After having winded down the river, it is time to go back to our point of departure: an artistic trend which surfaced during the late first century A.D. under the Flavian dynasty and which lasted to approximately the turn of the third century A.D. As we saw, the river god type which was to become so popular was not a Roman invention and appeared in Hellenistic Egypt long before the beginning of the empire. Likewise, river god artworks do not disappear suddenly, but only slowly fade from the Roman iconographical record in the last centuries of antiquity. Yet in both cases the number of artworks, as well as their quality, size and distribution is considerably lower than in the imperial period mentioned above. Evidently, river god imagery held a unique importance to the citizens of the Roman Empire, an importance shared by west and east.

Rivers large and small were honoured with personifications, though the Nile and, to a lesser extent, the Tiber received the most enduring attention. These images appeared across the entire spectrum of Roman artistic formats, from reliefs and coins to mosaics and paintings. By far the most popular however were sculptures, ranging from small garden statuettes to colossal artworks. Yet, as we saw at length in the first chapter, placing these artworks in their original setting presents us with considerable difficulties, especially in the case of sculptures. We know that some derived from public and private fountains, some came from bathhouses and others still adorned sanctuaries. We might safely assume by now that these were the most regular places for river god sculptures to be set up. Fashion will surely have played its role in the making of these artworks, but behind the fashionable trend it is clear that Roman culture attached great significance to its waterways. Having presented the importance of rivers in Roman culture, what do the previous chapters tell us about the artworks in the first chapter?

A uniform interpretation of river god imagery is difficult to establish. A battered Rhine under an emperor's foot on a sestertius issued after a successful campaign has quite a different meaning than a corpulent statuette of the Nile on a fountain in the lush garden of a villa owner. Not to mention the rivers themselves, each with their own individual characteristics, had different connotations in different contexts. The Nile was lauded for the fertility it bestowed on Egypt and the empire, yet also formed a symbol for Egypt as the eternal "other". Despite the duplicity in meaning, these images also share a number of fundamental similarities which have presented themselves throughout this investigation. Based on chapter two to four, a number of themes emerge.

*Personification*

Firstly there is the question of appearance. Our artworks depict rivers as completely anthropomorphic figures. Because such geographical personifications appear so often in later European art, where their religious and geographical importance was very limited, their appearance and decorative function are often taken for granted. By doing so, we lose sight of the original ancient impulse to depict rivers (or virtues, cities and the like) as human-like beings. As both the religious veneration of chapter two and the imperial geography of chapter three have shown, individual rivers had unique characteristics, even something akin to personalities. The line between river god and river personification is blurry, if not completely non-existent. River deities were, in a mythological setting, described as Olympian gods, sentient and anthropomorphic. But, as we saw in Virgil, non-anthropomorphic descriptions crept in on numerous occasions. Actual cultic worship of such

anthropomorphic deities, along the lines of other Roman gods, seems to have been rare. Of our artworks, none seem to have been used as cultic statues, though Pliny's description of the Clitumnus indicates that such statues did exist. Besides cult these artworks had their mythological appeal, in for example the case of the Tiber or the smaller, Greek rivers. River deities in a mythological setting allowed their owners to lay claim to a slice of Greco-Roman literary culture, showing of their learnedness and sophisticated cultural affinities.

Besides mythology, rivers had a more ambivalent status within Roman religion. Their waters cleansed, in the most extreme case even stripping common men of their mortality, as in the case of Aeneas. The Tiber and the Nile on several occasions found themselves side by side in the temples of Sarapis while some members of the Roman personnel along the Rhine and Danube frontier felt the need to appease these local river deities. Firmly within the borders of the empire meanwhile, the flooding of the Nile and the Tiber were important, religiously laden events. The eagerly awaited and much celebrated Nile flood was occasionally construed as a boon from the Nile god himself, or more in general of the Egyptian gods. The Tiber floods on the other hand brought devastation instead of prosperity: a dire warning to the Roman people from their gods or, as Tiberius would have it, just the river system clogging up.

One thing that is striking in these accounts of floods is the multitude of explanations offered by ancient authors. Lacking the modern, materialistic worldview, abnormal behaviour in rivers seems to have been a considerable source of anxiety and/or uncertainty for many in the empire, as much as Tacitus might scold them for being ignorant or superstitious. "Scientific" explanations, such as an abundance of rain or water flowing back into the rivers course from the sea, are given side by side with religiously tinted explanations. Nowhere more so than with the mysterious Nile flood, the cause of which remained disputed throughout antiquity. Different attitudes to scientific knowledge and explanation, as well as a lack of simple factual knowledge, also worked their way into geography. Pliny never described rivers as part of a continuous hydrological cycle but rather as a semi-biography which ran from spring to delta. When Pliny describes a rivers' unique characteristics or its course through the landscape, he turns to human behaviour and experiences for his explanation. Rivers, like generals, scholars or artists, are indeed famous: distinct landmarks, well-known throughout the empire. This individuality expresses itself not just in the rivers' course, but in its waters. Rivers retain their individuality when they mingle, while a river like the Nile even fattens and fertilizes human beings. The lines between "secular" fact and semi-sentient, semi-divine entity were blurry indeed. Although this is not a direct explanation for the popularity of river god art, it does shed a light on the appeal such artworks had to an (educated) Roman audience. Depicting rivers as anthropomorphic beings was not just a fashionable decorative trend for citizens of the empire, but lay at the core of their perception of their world. The owner of a reclining Tiber or a Nile mosaic, be it an emperor or a member of Rome's elite, ordered chaotic nature in a recognizable, passive form.

*Space, identity and dominance*

Secondly, because of the role they played in the perception of space, rivers also functioned as markers for identity. Both Rome and Alexandria minted their coins with images of the Tiber and Nile, respectively. Smaller cities followed suit, choosing local rivers as emblems that captured the essence of their city and community. This was not only a matter of civic symbolism: local rivers were popular subjects for mosaics, like the Euphrates appearing on mosaics in the east of the empire. Because of

this role as symbols for communities or entire regions, river gods were also important symbols of Roman dominance. The role of river deities within triumphal processions is of direct importance to our artworks. Not only do river deities within triumphs appear as some of the earliest known depictions of this type of artwork in the west, they also seem to have been a consistent part of Roman triumphs, such as the Jordan which graced the triumph of Titus after the Jewish War. A considerable number of coinage, as well as Domitian's colossal equestrian monument on the Forum Romanum, depict the emperor with river deities at his feet. The obvious explanation is the rivers' reference to a certain region in which the emperor in question had gained military victories. Yet, the connection between monarchs and geographical discovery and knowledge showcased in the third chapter has shown that rivers where more than a mere reference point within a landscape but, in a way, captured the essence of a geographical region as much as a the models of a famous city or captive barbarians in native dress. The function of a number of rivers, notably the Rhine, Danube and Euphrates, as boundaries of the empire only further stressed the connection between river deity and military action. Their intimate connection with triumphal processions as well as Roman interests in the civilizing of nature make them far more potent as symbols than a mere geographical shorthand. As highways, boundaries and fertilizers, they were the objects and facilitators of conquest with unique identities. The composition of coins depicting the Rhine, Danube or Euphrates and Tigris – with river deities lying passive and prostate before an armed emperor's feet – evokes the atmosphere of Roman dominance and military success. Like the more traditional standards with discarded enemy weapons and armour, these rivers presented a neutralized threat: once hostile, now in possession of Rome and ready to be civilized. River gods were stamped on coins with a reason: they were meant to reach beyond the actual event of a triumph. Coins with river god imagery reminded audiences of the continued dominance over and pacification of conquered territories. Like the triumphal arches (over bridges or otherwise) they represented a victory *in perpetuam* over hostile regions, human foes and natural obstacles. When the depicted river deities carried their traditional attributes, such as a cornucopia or rudder, the message was all the stronger: the prosperity they once lavished on Rome's enemies was now in service of the empire.

Their connection with the triumph made rivers suitable candidates for the expression of long-term authority and dominance as well. As rivers flowing through two almost opposing types of communities, the Tiber and Nile were uniquely suited to represent the idea of the Roman Empire, a connection further strengthened by the rather more prosaic importance of the grain trade. We saw that the Tiber is continuously depicted with the she-wolf and twins, while the Nile is usually depicted with African wildlife and symbols of fertility. The consistency of their iconographical program is unique: artworks depicting other major rivers of the empire never received quite such a level of iconographic distinction, or were only occasionally outfitted with defining characteristics (such as the tiger as a symbol of the Euphrates). The pairing was uniquely suited to the Iseum in Rome, as I showed at length in the second chapter, but it worked just as well outside of this sanctuary, such as in the Trajan's colossal river deities gracing an Esquiline nymphaeum. The Nile and the Tiber symbolize two very different worlds: one truly Roman (as evinced by the she-wolf and twins), the other a former enemy, conquered but still emphatically non-Roman (leaning on a statue of a sphinx). Nonetheless, both rivers in their singular artistic execution as well as their passive pose signal harmonious unison, especially in the wider setting of a nymphaeum. Here the Nile (as well as the unruly Tiber which would not allow traffic) is pacified and civilized through the format of monumental Roman architecture. The emphasis is on peace and abundance, all made possible by

Roman imperial rule which connects, tames and exploits these two almost opposing regions. Their presence in a monumental nymphaeum in the heart of Rome only underlines the appeal of river god artworks to imperial propaganda.

*The Roman triumph over nature*

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly of all, river god artworks expressed another, related kind of triumph: that over nature. Shown at length in the fourth chapter, Roman emperors took a particular interest in controlling water resources in various forms. Rivers formed the stage for emperor to display their ability to harness nature's resources to the fullest and alter the landscape of the empire. The language of the Roman triumph over nature expresses itself most clearly in the bridges of the empire. In themselves they were symbols of Roman knowledge and power yet when adorned with inscriptions celebrating the emperor, as well as grandiose triumphal arches depicting the emperor victorious, the Roman discourse of power over the natural landscape reached its height. The same can be said for the major channelling projects of the empire, or the extremely costly aqueducts, both of which were a source of great prestige and closely linked to the person of the emperor. Yet the emperor was not the only one to share in that prestige: such major aquatic projects were also a source of civic pride, to be celebrated and lauded in local inscriptions or monuments.

River god artworks were closely related to such ambitions to dominate and control the natural world and its water resources. A considerable number of these artworks were most likely placed at public fountains and large-scale, imperially sponsored bathhouses, fed by the above mentioned aqueducts (themselves often made possible by imperial munificence). River god art reflects the themes of luxury and beauty with its cornucopia's and plant motifs. Because of its flood, the Nile in particular evoked prosperity. The Nile mosaic at Leptis Magna for example, found on the floor of a privately owned bathhouse, stresses the connection by depicting putti, a Nilometer (reading αγαθη τυχη, 'Good Fortune') and cheerful musicians saluting the river deity. As part of fountains and with overturned urns, river gods evoked the ever-flowing abundance of the waters of the baths or fountains in question. In a city recently endowed with an aqueduct and/or baths, the connection would have been especially poignant, as might have been the case for bathers in Salamis or Milete. Like the evocation of (physical) well-being and abundance, attributes connected with trade and, more general, navigability also appear in considerable number. Pliny lauded numerous rivers expressly for the fact that they were navigable and conductive to trade, while the Nile and Tiber together in the Iseum invoke the Roman grain trade. These attributes of abundance, luxury and wealth further signal the triumph of imperial Roman authority, headed by the emperor, and Roman civilization in general over previously chaotic or unproductive nature. The empire civilized nature by means of its large-scale civic project, thus bringing physical well-being and prosperity to the citizens of the empire through Roman rule and civilization. This idea is perhaps most clearly expressed in Egypt, where the emperor had himself depicted on Alexandrian coinage together with the Nile (of course bearing a cornucopia) and where he was equated with divine, life-giving force of the Nile flood itself.

This triumph over nature was one shared with the elite of the empire. Villa owners with sufficiently large gardens and purses could lay partial claim to the same language of wealth and abundance. Installing river deities in a lavish villa garden surrounded by plants, fountains and other artworks like Domitian in his Alban Villa or, more modestly, D. Octavianus Quartio in his Pompeian townhouse

would only heighten the already dominant theme of prosperity and the joys of civilization. This could go hand in hand with fashionable exoticism. Statues and mosaics of the Nile were by far the most popular of all river god artworks. Considering the modest size of a number of sculptures, we might assume they were commissioned by private individuals for decorative or other purposes. Next to its spectacular fertility, the Nile was also the breeder of exotic monsters and pygmies; Egypt a place of leisure and easy living. We have already noted on the several occasions the use of sphinxes, crocodiles and hippopotami in artworks depicting the Nile, as well as popular opinion on the mysterious nature of its sources and flood. Such Egyptian-themed artworks were part of a wider intellectual interest in Egypt which surged during the first centuries of the Empire, an interest in which the Nile played a large role. Outside an interest in the exotic, a statue, painting or mosaic of the Nile also served as testament to the wider intellectual interest and cosmopolitan attitudes of its owner: a man or woman aware of popular scientific and literary topics as well as celebrating the reach of the Empire.

*The Augustan example*

River god artworks represented fundamental imperial ideas on space, power and civilization, for the citizens of the Empire, but that does not yet explain their temporal distribution. Why does river god imagery increase during the Flavian dynasty and slowly disappear again the beginning of the third century? This question is considerably more difficult to answer, despite the prevailing interest in river in Roman literature. Part of the reason no doubt has to do with matters of taste and fashion, difficult to trace and not very satisfactory in their explanative power.

Still, we have some indications of why the Flavian dynasty chose to promote such imagery. Firstly there is the statue of the Nile which Vespasian hauled over to Rome and which, judging by Pliny, drew considerable attention. The image was further promulgated on Alexandrian coinage and the Nile in the Iseum might have been inspired by it as well. As such, this Vespasian Nile might have functioned as a direct catalyst for imperial river god imagery in general. A complementary explanation can be found with Rome's first emperor. Augustus has appeared on numerous occasions in this thesis, though rarely in direct connection with river god artworks. His reign, as noted in the first chapter, saw a very limited number of such artworks. Augustus did not pioneer the discourse of the Roman triumph over nature and the crucial role of the emperor in that triumph. Such ideas were to some extent common in all ancient societies, from the canal-mending Alexander to the bridge building Xerxes. However, as the first emperor of Rome, Augustus did modify and codify. He was the first to build triumphal arches over bridges, was responsible for a large number of aqueducts, insisted on controlling the water supply of Rome, expressed his power through geographical knowledge and claimed world dominance. It was only natural for the Flavians to look to Augustus as an exemplar to copy, as a way of legitimizing their ascendency to power, especially after the debauchery of Nero's reign. Augustan ideas about imperial power over nature, coupled with Vespasian's newly acquired statue, might have proven fertile ground for the further development of river god imagery. Vespasian's stay in Egypt might have also smoothed the introduction of such artworks.

The decline of river god artworks was slower and less circumspect than their rise, the result of broad societal changes which made their symbolism seem increasingly out of date. At the beginning of the third century, when the first cracks start to appear in Rome's triumphant discourse on imperial power over other peoples and over nature, river deities might have increasingly fallen out of favour

within the imperial iconographic record. Cities on the other hand, to some degree left to fend for themselves again, expressed their renewed sense of civic responsibility and pride by minting local river deities on their coinage. The process would have been completed during the crisis of the third century, when economic hardships coupled with a complete breakdown of imperial authority might make Rome's earlier triumphant attitude towards the landscape seem an increasingly distant reality.

Imperial river god art, instead of being just a fashionable form of decoration, present us with a unique look into the Roman conceptualization of space, power and identity at the height of the empire. One that is at times recognizable, at others far removed from our own. These artworks flourished during the second century because they tied into fundamental Roman ideas on power and civilization. Rivers, because of their practical importance in travel and their symbolic importance as symbols of a community, lay at the heart of the very idea of the Roman Empire as a territorial and social entity. The rivers of the Empire no longer just served their own, local communities but now truly carried imperial waters.

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*Unless stated otherwise in the footnotes, all translations used are the most recent available edition of the Loeb Classical Library.*

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# Appendix – Images

**Figure 1: the Rhone at Versailles**

**Figure 2: the Ashmunein Nile**

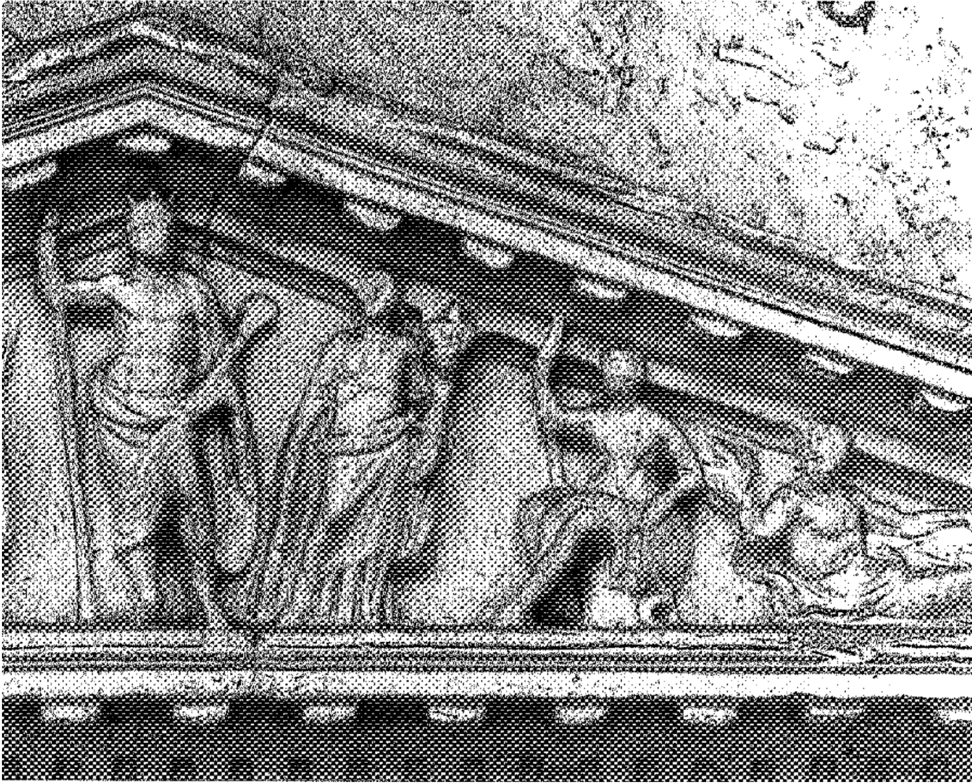

**Figure 3: the Ara Pietais Augustae**

**Figure 4: the Nile from the Villa Albana**

**Figure 5: Alexandrian coin showing the emperor Domitian together with the Nile and 16 putti**

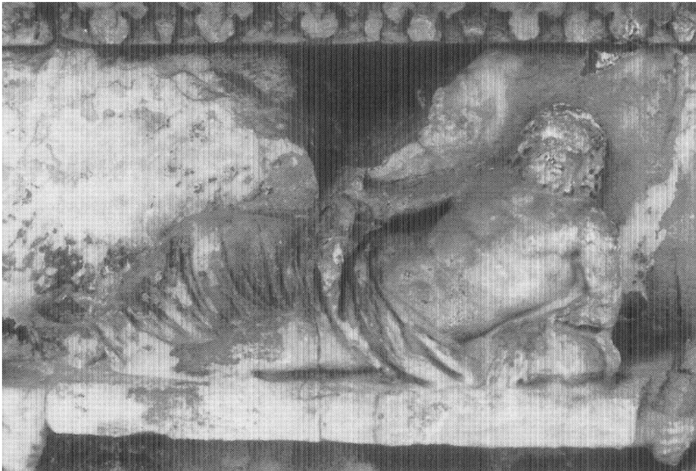

**Figure 6: the Jordan on the arch of Titus**

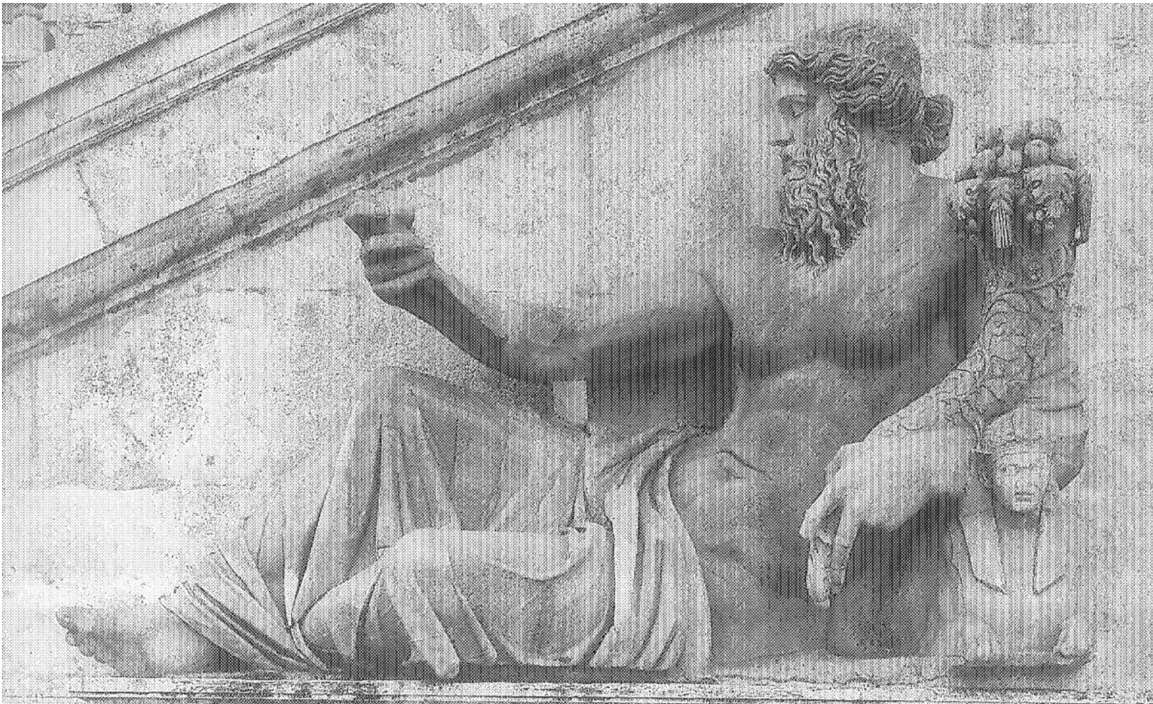

**Figure 7: the Capitoline Nile**

**Figure 8: the Capitoline Tiber**

**Figures 9 and 10: Alexandrian bronze coin depicting the Nile reclining on a hippopotamus, 113-116 A.D. (left); aureus from Rome depicting the Danube, 105-111 A.D. (right)**

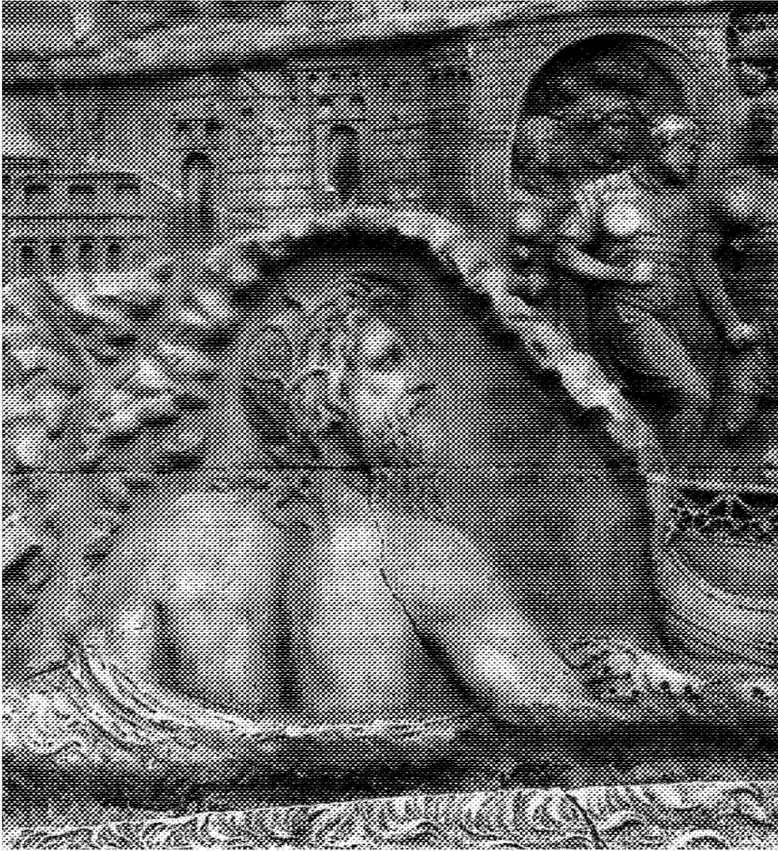

**Figure 11: the Danube on Trajan's column.**

**Figure 12: the Vatican Nile**

**Figure 13: the Tiber in the Louvre**

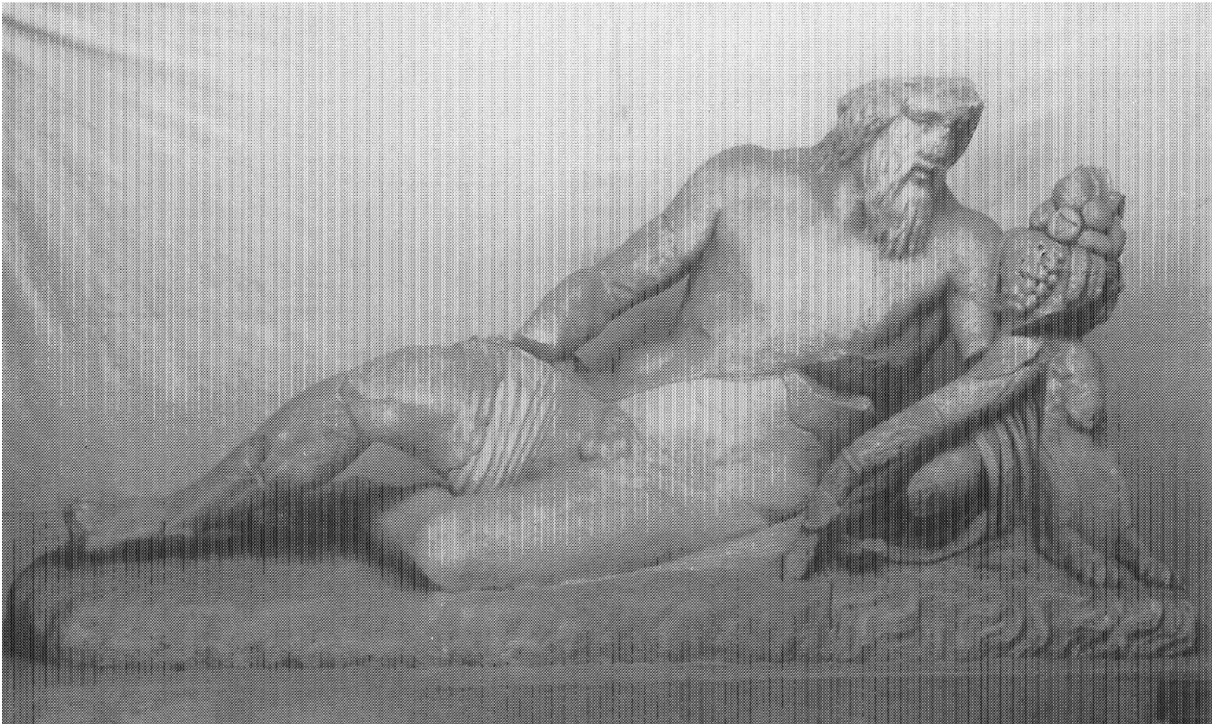

**Figure 14: the Nile from the Villa Hadriana**

**Figure 15: the Tiber from the Villa Hadriana**

**Figure 16: the Nile from the Atrium of the Torso Belvedere**

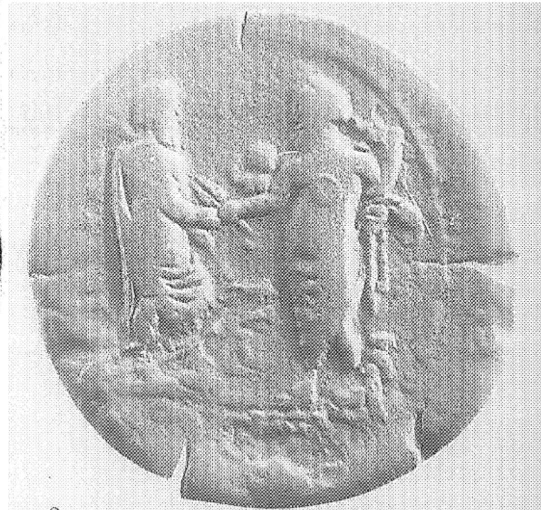

**Figure 17 and 18: bronze medallion with the Tiber with the snake of Asclepius, 140-143 A.D. (left); the Nile and Tiber shaking hands on Alexandrian coinage 143-144 A.D. (right)**

**Figure 19: the Nile and Euphrates in the Merida Mithraeum**

**Figure 20: Mars-Rhea-Silvia sarcophagus from Rome, now in the Vatican Museums. The Tiber is depicted on the far left**

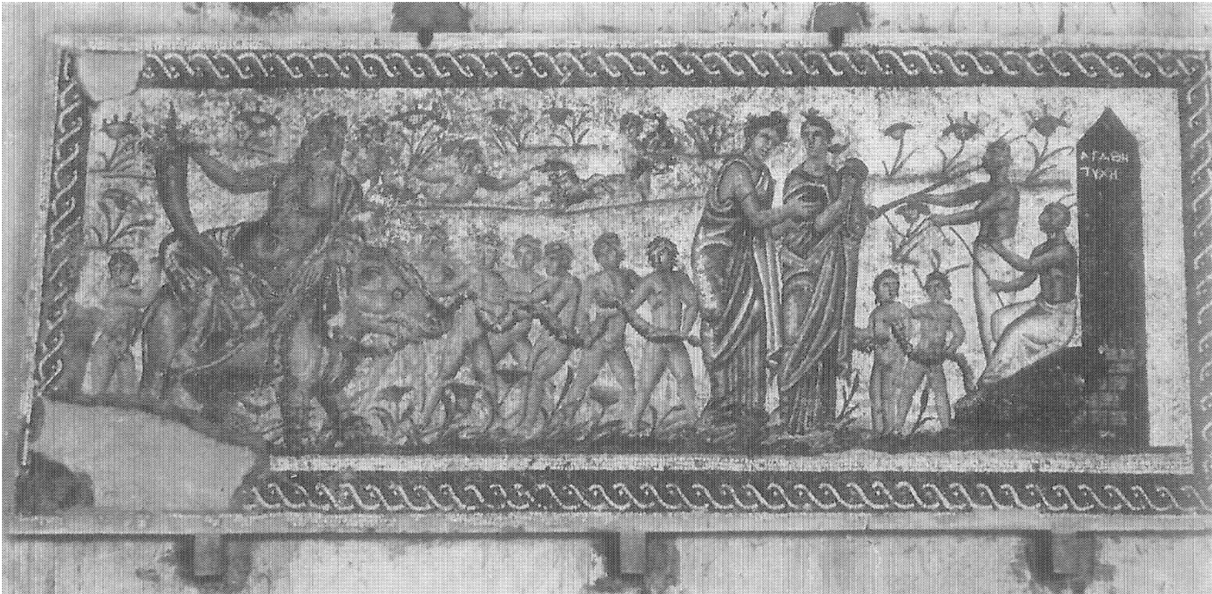

**Figure 21: the Nile-mosaic from Leptis Magna**

**Figure 22: medallion issued by Gallienus in 262 A.D.**

**Figure 23: unidentified river god, second century, found at the Antonine bathhouse of Ephesos, now in the Archeological Museum of Istanbul**

**Figure 24: unidentified river god, second century, Villa Albani**

**Sources**

Cover: Klementa (1993) plate 7, figure 13.

Figure 1: http://o-o.preferred.ams03t01.v1.cache4.c.bigcache.googleapis.com/static.panoramio.com/photos/original/20807195.jpg?ms=tsu&mt=1341213137&cms_redirect=yes&redirect_counter=1&mv=u; accessed at 01-07-2012.

Figure 2: Klementa (1993) plate I, figure 1.

Figure 3: LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.2: no.12.

Figure 4: LIMC *Neilos* 6.2: no.5.

Figure 5: Görg (1988) 75.

Figure 6: Klementa (1993) plate 23, figure 46.

Figure 7: LIMC *Neilos* 6.2: no.6.

Figure 8: Klementa (1993) plate 3, figure 6.

Figure 9: LIMC *Neilos* 6.2: no.13.

Figure 10: LIMC *Danuvius* 3.2: no.6.

Figure 11: LIMC *Danuvius* 3.2: no.2.

Figure 12: Klementa (1993) plate 12, figure 23.

Figure 13: Klementa (1993) plate 12, figure 24.

Figure 14: Klementa (1993) plate 9, figure 17.

Figure 15: Klementa (1993) plate 9, figure 18.

Figure 16: Klementa (1993) plate 11, figure 21.

Figure 17: LIMC *Tiberinus* 8.2: no.23.

Figure 18: LIMC *Neilos* 6.2: no.48.

Figure 19: LIMC *Euphrates* 4.2: no.3.

Figure 20: Klementa (1993) plate 21, figure 42.

Figure 21: Klementa (1993) plate 18, figure 35.

Figure 22: LIMC *Euphrates* 4.2: no.24.

Figure 23: Klementa (1993) plate 30, figure 59.

Figure 24: Klementa (1993) plate 34, figure 67.